
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
KRISTA STREET
THE COMPLETE LOST CHILDREN SERIES
KRISTA STREET
FORGOTTEN
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REMEMBERED
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THE COMPLETE LOST CHILDREN SERIES

BOOKS 1-6

The Lost Children Trilogy
Forgotten – Book 1
Remembered – Book 2
Reborn – Book 3

The Lost Children World
Retribution – Book 4
Creation – Book 5
Illumination – Book 6

KRISTA STREET

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PREFACE

The Complete Lost Children Series is a collection of upper YA Paranormal Fantasy novels and novellas. Due to mild profanity, some violence, and several mature scenes including non-graphic on-page sex, **the recommended reading age is 17+.**

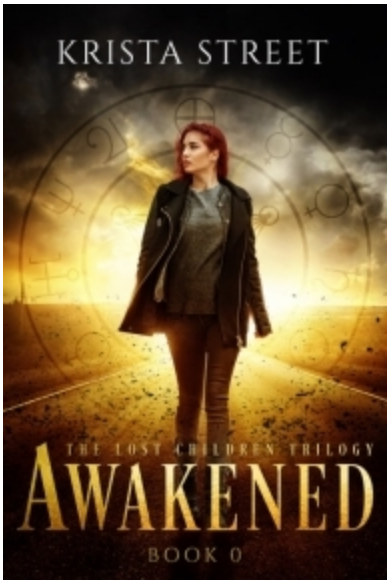
MAIN MENU

FORGOTTEN – Book 1
REMEMBERED – Book 2
REBORN – Book 3
RETRIBUTION – Book 4
CREATION – Book 5
ILLUMINATION – Book 6

AWAKENED

If you're new to The Lost Children Series, you may want to start with the fast-paced prequel, *Awakened*, book 0. While it's not necessary to read this prequel before beginning the series, this is still a book you don't want to miss!

Download *Awakened*



After waking in an alleyway with no memories, a strange tattoo, and a supernatural ability, Lena knows something extraordinary happened to her. When a deep guiding instinct hums to life inside her, she sets out into the unknown in hopes of unlocking secrets to her past.

Now, hitchhiking around the country with nothing but a personalized bracelet as proof of a life she once led, Lena must decide—seek answers to her past at any cost or accept that the truth to who she is may never be known.

Download *Awakened*

FORGOTTEN

The Lost Children Trilogy
Book One

THE LOST CHILDREN SERIES—BOOK ONE

CHAPTER ONE

The cowboy's cloud danced and swayed around his shoulders, its color pure white. Clouds didn't get much better than that. He'd be a safe ride.

"Where you headed?" The cowboy's arm draped across the steering wheel in the old diesel. The truck grumbled softly in the quiet morning.

"West." I snapped my vision back to normal. His cloud disappeared.

"Well, that's where I'm goin' too. Hop in if you want a ride."

I pulled the door open and slipped inside. With relief, I dropped my backpack at my feet. "Thanks for picking me up."

"Not a problem. I'm Pete."

Smiling, I shook his hand. "Nice to meet you, Pete. I'm Lena."

I guessed Pete to be in his early sixties. He had darkly tanned skin and dressed simply in jeans and a red patterned flannel shirt. A large cowboy hat covered his head. He even had a big belt buckle.

I settled into the seat. The soft fabric felt wonderfully comfortable after the hard, cold ground that had been my night's bed. Pete didn't seem in any hurry to drive despite a lone car honking when it passed. The old cowboy hadn't completely pulled onto the shoulder.

"You thirsty?" He popped the top off a thermos. The delicious scent of hot coffee wafted my way. "It's already sweetened with cream and sugar. Want a cup?"

I perked up. "Are you sure? Is there enough for you?"

He poured a cup. "There's plenty."

My fingers curled around the mug. I gulped the coffee. It burned my throat, but I kept swallowing. The wonderfully rich brew filled the clawing hole in my belly.

Pete finally put the truck into drive and pulled back onto the road. The truck rumbled every time it switched gears.

"Music too loud?" Pete asked. Soft country music strummed through the speakers.

I smiled and set my empty coffee cup in the console. "No, it's fine."

“You from these parts?”

By *these* parts, I assumed he meant here, in eastern Colorado. Good question. If only I knew. “No. How about you? You grow up around here?”

“Sure did. Lived just outside Little Raven my whole life, just like my father and his father before him. We’ve been ranchin’ that land since the eighteen hundreds.”

“That long? You have kids?”

“We got three girls. All the girls settled in the state. Fiona married a farmer, and Shelby married another rancher, but Haley, she moved to the city. Denver.” He shook his head. “I can’t imagine livin’ in a city that size.”

I nodded, pretending to understand, even though I had no idea if I’d ever lived in a city or not.

“Now Val and I,” Pete continued. “She’s my wife. We’ve lived out here our whole lives. Can’t imagine livin’ anywhere different. It’s like what they say about puttin’ down roots. When they grow, it’s hard to pull ‘em up . . .”

I fingered my snarled red curls as I listened to the old cowboy. A content feeling washed through me. I liked Pete. He hadn’t commented on my dingy appearance or skeletal figure. That was a first.

“What ‘bout your family? Any of ‘em live out here?”

I tensed, sitting straighter. “Oh. Um . . .”

A long moment of uncomfortable silence passed before Pete reached into the backseat. “I’ve got sandwiches too. What do ya prefer? Beef or ham?”

While Pete was rummaging for sandwiches, I turned toward the window and took a deep breath. The sliver of peace and happiness that the cowboy’s kindness and generosity had provoked faded like the sun behind storm clouds. I hated personal questions. They put me in an awkward position and reminded me how scary my life was. The only thing I knew about myself?

My name. That was it.

I stared out the window as the landscape flew by. Fields of wheat surrounded us. Their tall tawny stalks rolled in the summer breeze like gentle swells in the ocean. Mountains loomed in the distance, their snowy peaks promising cooler temps to come. I concentrated on the landscape. My breathing still came too fast. Pete hummed along to the music, oblivious to

the unease and fear bubbling up inside me, like a geyser that threatened to blow.

Not knowing my identity, and being reminded of that, brought back that terrifying day in April.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I hated thinking about that day. *Hated* it.

Four months ago, I woke up *outside* on the street in Rapid City, South Dakota. I still remembered that day like yesterday: the cold, hard pavement chilling me through my jeans, the smells of rotting garbage from a nearby dumpster and the absolute panic that made my eyes widen in terror. I had no idea where I was or how I got there. The scariest thing, though, was when I realized I had no memories. None. I didn't know my age, who I was, where I came from, how I got in that alleyway, nothing. And strangest of all—I had a supernatural ability.

So that was the beginning of everything. Now, I was trying to figure out what happened to me.

Luckily, Pete had stopped this morning as I stood alongside the barren county road, my pale skin burning in the hot, unforgiving sun. The desolate road wasn't an ideal location to find a ride. Unfortunately, the trucker I'd been hitching with last night turned south. My instinct told me to go west. So I got out.

In the middle of nowhere.

Not my smartest move, but I hadn't known what else to do. At least, it had turned out okay. Once again, I was traveling in the right direction. My gut instinct, that steady subtle feeling I'd been following since leaving Rapid City weeks ago, told me to go west right now. So west I went. If only I knew what west was leading to.

Pete set a sandwich in my hands. The soft feel of bread snapped me back to reality. "Oh, thanks."

"Hope ham's okay."

"Yeah." My mouth watered. Mayonnaise and lettuce accompanied the meat. I took a bite and lost all control. Wolfing it down, I smiled sheepishly when finished. Pete just handed me a second sandwich.

"Try the beef. Val smokes it herself. It's darn good."

I took a big bite. "Wow, this is fantastic." I took another bite and said in between chews, "So, tell me more about your ranch."

Pete's eyes lit up. "Well, we got about ninety thousand acres, although some is leased from the National Forest Service. We raise mainly Black Angus . . ."

IT WAS LATE afternoon when we approached a small town. A sign declaring *Little Raven* passed on the right. Large mountains framed the community, their tips covered with snow. My eyes wandered across the buildings. It didn't appear to be a big town. Maybe a few thousand people.

"Last stop before my ranch," Pete said. "Or if you'd rather, you're welcome to stay with us for a while."

Stay at a home? Under a roof? His words were so foreign it took me a moment to process them. For four months, I'd slept outside as I searched for answers to what happened to me.

"Really?"

Pete tipped his hat up. "You look like you could use a good night's rest and some decent food."

"That sounds great, although I don't want to burden—" My breath stopped short when the strangest sensation grew inside me.

"Is that a yes?"

"Um." I gripped the door handle tightly. The feeling grew. It felt as if someone banged a tuning fork inside me, the strong vibration demanding my attention. *What's happening?*

We'd almost passed Little Raven, when an abrupt realization came to me. *Is this the instinct?* That possibility occurred to me just as we pulled onto a county road heading out of town. It made me grow cold.

"Can you stop?" I blurted.

Pete slowed and pulled onto the shoulder. I scanned our surroundings. Little Raven was probably a quarter mile behind us already. Distant rooftops shimmered in the sunlight. My eyes darted back and forth. *Do I know this place? Have I been here before? Is that why I feel this?*

I unbuckled my seat belt and tentatively opened the door.

"Lena?"

I stepped out, closed my eyes and concentrated on the feeling. I took a step toward town. The feeling grew exponentially. My breath stopped, and my eyes flew open. That had *never* happened before.

I whirled around. "I think I'll check out Little Raven."

Pete propped his arm across the steering wheel. “You sure? My ranch isn’t too far up this road. You could stay with us for the night. Even a couple if ya want. Little Raven’s not goin’ anywhere.”

Just at the mention of Little Raven, anticipation oozed through me like warm honey. Something was waiting for me there. I could feel it. “Thanks, but I’m going to head into town.”

“All right, but you come up to our place if you need somethin’.”

“I will. Thank you.”

Pete tipped his hat back into place. “Best of luck to you, Lena, was nice meetin’ ya.”

“You too, thanks.”

After I slammed the door, the old diesel rumbled off. I spun on my heels in the direction of town and reached down to grab my backpack. Once it was strapped to my back, I’d be off, striding toward the town center, searching for the cause of this feeling, maybe finding the answers I so desperately sought.

But my hand only grabbed air. Nothing but dirt and dust surrounded my worn shoes.

I twirled in a circle. “You’ve got to be kidding me. Lena, you idiot!”

Pete was already a half mile away. His rumbling truck headed into a thick forest. I knew exactly where my bag sat—on the floor of the front passenger’s seat, right where I’d left it.

I cupped both of my hands around my mouth. “Pete!”

Of course, he didn’t hear me. I started running.

“Pete!” I yelled again. I waved my arms overhead. The old cowboy continued driving. A second later, his truck rounded a turn and disappeared into the forest. I kept running, as if by some miracle I’d eventually catch him.

CHAPTER TWO

I didn't catch him. Obviously.

Of course, that reasonable thought didn't prevail until I'd been running after him for at least half an hour. By the time I reached that point, I figured I might as well keep going. He said his ranch was up the road. *That means it's close. Right?*

I kept telling myself his ranch was probably around the next bend. Only thing, it had been at least ten bends now with no sign of it.

If it was anything but my backpack, I would not have been doing this. But I needed my bag back. It held everything I owned. My cash, clothes, map, water bottle . . . everything. All of those things would be essential if it took me a few days to understand why the instinct led me to Little Raven.

However, that wasn't the real reason I wanted my backpack. That stuff could be replaced, but what I had in the small, zippered front pocket could never be replaced. The irony was that I took it off and put it away to *not* lose it.

Typical.

I kept walking. And walking. The evening passed slowly with no sign of Pete's. It wasn't until the sun descended behind a mountain that I began chewing my lip. I pictured the ditch I'd slept in last night. It had been cool but sheltered. Now? I was at high altitude in the mountains.

I stopped in the road. Wind whistled through the trees. Dying sunlight peeked over a mountain. No sign of civilization appeared anywhere.

Great, Lena. Well done. Nothing like being lost at high altitude with no food or water. Or shelter. Or any idea of where you're going for that matter.

I picked up my pace and ignored the searing pain from a blister on my heel that burst wide open. The aggressive pace wasn't easy, but I kept it up. My dry mouth and sandpaper tongue weren't helping. My focus kept drifting from finding Pete's to dreaming of water. At least it kept me from worrying about dying from exposure.

Yep, great logic, Lena. Instead, you'll die from dehydration. Much more painful.

I rounded another bend in the road when a sound reached my ears. Dust swirled around my shoes when I abruptly stopped. I cocked my head and listened. A second ticked past. The sound came again. A faint, distant rumbling. I grinned.

That only meant one thing.

I twirled in a circle and tried to decipher from which direction the vehicle came. The rumbling grew louder behind me. I turned and searched for the vehicle in the evening twilight. Eventually, I spotted what made the noise. A shiny, new Suburban rounded a hill in the distance. Its headlights pierced the dim light and wove in and out of view as it snaked through the forest. My shoulders sagged in relief.

When the Suburban rounded the final turn, I ran into the middle of the road and waved both arms overhead. Thankfully, the vehicle slowed as it neared and ground to a halt about ten yards away. I jogged to the vehicle, but the driver's door was already opening.

Dark boots with two-inch heels emerged. I stopped by the hood, tried to calm my breathing and waited for the driver to get out. When she extracted her long limbs, I examined her tall frame. She wore black from head to toe. Black boots, black pants, and a long-sleeved black shirt. Even her hair was black, and from the looks of it, she also had olive skin. Everything about her hinted at a Hispanic or Mediterranean heritage.

"Hi," I said.

"Evening," she replied.

I reached up to smooth my hair and hoped it wasn't too wild. That always gave off a bad impression. "Say, you couldn't give me a ride, could you? I'm trying to find a guy's ranch, but I don't know how far it is. I don't think I'll find it before dark."

She didn't respond.

I briefly wondered how I must look through her eyes. I hoped my lack of deodorant wouldn't stop her from helping me. It had stopped more than one person in the past. "Um, would you mind?"

The silence stretched.

"You're walking to a guy's *ranch*?" she finally said.

"Yeah."

She shook her head, her short black hair swaying while her brow furrowed. “Why?”

Why? Does it matter? “Well, he gave me a ride, and I left my backpack in his truck. I need to get it back.”

She cocked her head. “You forgot your bag in some guy’s truck.” She seemed to be saying it more to herself, but I nodded anyway. “That’s why you changed course again.”

Her words were so quiet I barely heard them, *if* I heard them. What I thought I heard didn’t make any sense. “Huh?”

“Nothing.” She stood quietly for a moment, still frowning. Finally, she sighed. “Okay, get in the back. We’ll take you to this ranch.”

For a brief moment, confusion filled me, but I was so grateful all I did was mumble thank you.

It was only when I reached for the door that I realized I’d broken my cardinal rule. Before she climbed into her seat, I switched my vision. Her cloud readily appeared.

My mouth fell open. I made my gaze shift back to normal and then switched it again. The same image glowed around her. *What the* . . .

A hazy blue and gold aura swirled around her shoulders.

“Are you okay?” She sat in her seat, the door still open as she peered out at me. For all intents and purposes, she looked like a normal twenty-some-year-old woman. However, the cloud that billowed around her spoke otherwise.

I switched my vision back to normal. “Uh, yes?”

She raised an eyebrow and slammed the door. I took a deep breath, my hand still on the door handle. *Get in or keep walking?* I frowned. It’s not as though her cloud seemed bad, just . . . different, not the white, gray or occasional black I was used to seeing.

Do you really want to spend tonight alone in the Rockies with no shelter?

I grasped the handle and pulled it open.

The second the interior was visible, my mouth fell open. Five other people sat in the Suburban. Three in the very back, one in the middle, and one in the front passenger seat. How had I not noticed that? I glanced at the windows. They were tinted, not to mention the interior light was off. No wonder I hadn’t seen them.

“Hello,” a girl exclaimed. She sat in the far back right. Unlike the driver, she had a bright friendly smile. Her button nose and shoulder length brown hair gave her a healthy, wholesome look.

“I’m Mica.” She waved.

“I’m Lena,” I replied automatically. I shifted my vision until her cloud appeared. Once again, the image completely blindsided me. Pink and blue hovered around her. I almost snapped my sight back to normal, but then assessed the two guys sitting beside Mica, the woman sitting in the middle row, and the guy looking out his window in the front seat.

They were all different.

Each person had colors in their cloud. All of them had the same blue but then everyone had a unique color. I’d never seen anything like it.

“Are you getting in?” Mica asked.

I shifted my sight back to normal. Mica still smiled brightly.

“Um,” I mumbled.

I wasn’t sure if I should. I’d seen hundreds of people, no, *thousands* of people, since that first morning in Rapid City. Every other person I’d met had similar appearing clouds. Dark, gray or white. The darker the cloud, the eviler a person was, the lighter, the kinder, but these guys? Not even close to normal.

“There’s plenty of room.” Mica still smiled.

I reminded myself their clouds didn’t appear bad, just inconclusive. “Right. I mean thanks.”

“Move your stuff, Jet.” Mica elbowed the guy sitting beside her. The guy reached forward and grabbed a duffel bag off the empty seat.

The two men beside Mica were obviously twins. Both had dark curly hair, stocky builds and bright blue eyes. Each of their biceps seemed as big as both of my thighs. The one by the window regarded me warmly. The one in the middle, Jet, smirked. I smiled tentatively in return before turning my gaze to the woman in the middle row.

For a moment, I just stared. She had to be some kind of supermodel. Her long blond hair flowed down her back in soft waves, and she had one of those hard-to-forget faces. Hollowed cheeks, a full mouth, and honey-brown eyes so piercing I couldn’t look away. Suddenly, I felt very self-conscious with my snarled, dark red hair and dirty, pale skin.

“So, get in . . .” Mica said slowly.

“Sorry.” I climbed in and closed the door. New car smell filled the cab. Whoever owned this vehicle must have recently bought it. When I sat, my knee banged into a huge suitcase in the aisle.

“Sorry about that.” The blond supermodel shifted the luggage.

“Ready?” the driver asked.

I clicked my seat belt in place, and with a spin of tires, we were off. The driver eyed me in the rearview mirror. “I’m assuming this ranch is in the direction you were walking?”

“Yeah, if you don’t mind dropping me off when we get there, that’d be great.”

“Hmm,” was all she replied.

The Suburban picked up speed as we traveled down the bumpy road. The forest grew darker by the second, and the air flowing in through someone’s open window dropped in temperature. I sighed. Despite this group having strange clouds, I was glad to be in a vehicle. Turning away from the window, I was startled to find the supermodel watching me.

“I’m Jacinda.” She extended her hand. Her nose wrinkled slightly. I knew she’d detected my stench.

I shook her long, fine-boned hand, and felt the usual embarrassment at my lack of hygiene. “Lena. It’s nice to meet you.”

“That’s Jet and Jasper,” Jacinda said, her face impassive again. She glanced toward the curly haired twins behind us. Jasper smiled, but the one in the middle, Jet, winked.

“In the front is Di and Flint,” Jacinda continued.

The woman in black, Di, eyed me in the rearview mirror as she drove, but the guy, Flint, sitting in the passenger’s seat, still stared out the window.

“Flint?” Jacinda said.

He didn’t move.

“Flint?” she called again.

He still didn’t move.

Jacinda frowned and shrugged, but my gaze lingered on the back of Flint’s head, not because he ignored me, but because there was something . . . about him. An emotion flickered through me, like a sense of déjà vu, but it passed too quickly for me to identify.

“So, you’re going to some ranch?” Jacinda asked. I forced my attention back to her. “Because some guy has your backpack that you left in his truck?”

“Yep.”

“Is he your friend?”

“Kind of.”

“Kind of?” she said.

I did an abrupt shake. “Wait, how did you know I left my backpack in his truck?”

“Isn’t that what you told Di?”

“Oh, right.” But that had been outside, when she’d been in the vehicle. *Weird*.

“So this guy is *kind of* your friend?” Jacinda’s eyebrows rose.

“Yeah. I just met him today.”

She eyed me, her light-brown eyes curious. “Then how were you riding with him?”

“I was hitchhiking. He picked me up this morning.”

“Hitchhiking?” Her tone told me exactly what she thought about that. “Do you hitchhike a lot?”

I assessed my filthy clothes and skeletal frame. I certainly didn’t look like someone who owned a car, or took the Greyhound for that matter. “Yeah.”

“Where were you going?”

“Little Raven.” Just thinking of the town made my breath quicken. I needed to get back there.

Jacinda’s smile widened. “So you *were* going to Little Raven.” She glanced toward the driver again. Di was still watching me in the rearview mirror. A small, almost smug expression shone in her reflection.

My brow furrowed. They knew I was going to Little Raven? But how could they know that? *I* hadn’t known I was going to Little Raven until that morning.

I shook that thought off. Of course, they didn’t know I was going there. I probably misunderstood, but then I remembered what Di murmured before I climbed in the Suburban, about how I’d changed course again. At least, that was what I thought she’d said. But how did any of that make sense? I sank back into my seat as an uneasy feeling settled in me. They all did have strange clouds . . .

“So, Leeena.” Jacinda took her time pronouncing the *e*. “Where are you from?”

“Rapid City.” It was the answer I gave everyone. After all, it was the closest I had to the truth.

“South Dakota?” Jasper called from the back.

“How long have you lived there?” Mica asked.

“A while.” I turned in my seat to better assess everyone. Jasper and Jet stared at one another, their expressions twitching a few times. They seemed oblivious to me studying them.

“A while?” Mica forced my attention to her.

“And you hitchhiked from Rapid City all the way to here?” Jacinda asked.

“That’s right.” For whatever reason, that statement made the entire Suburban fall eerily silent. I tried to keep my breathing even, but this group got weirder by the second. Between the strange clouds, probing questions and bizarre comments that I couldn’t possibly be hearing right, I didn’t know what to think of them.

Okay, it’s not the first time you’ve been in a strange situation. Just get control of the conversation and get out when they stop.

I smiled tightly and clasped my hands together. “Enough about me, where are all of you headed?”

I waited for someone to say something. Nobody did. Instead, the only reactions were a few, subtle glances to one another. The hum of the engine filled the void.

“Or, are you all from Colorado?” I asked.

“Oh . . .” Jacinda finally replied.

I followed Jacinda’s gaze. Di was eyeing me again in the rearview mirror.

“Well, we’re . . .” Mica cut in, but then she stopped and glanced at Di too.

“Ah—” Jasper said.

“We’re from all over.” After Di’s statement, the silence resumed.

“Oh, okay.”

A minute passed, and then Mica pulled a book out of her bag. A second later, Jet and Jasper turned on an action movie in the headrest’s TV. The sound of gunfire and screeching tires filled the back. As for Jacinda, she smiled sweetly and extracted a nail file from her pocket. Lifting her hand, she squinted in the dying light and began filing.

I frowned and sank back into my seat. I eyed everyone suspiciously. They all seemed busy, except for Flint. Not once had he shifted. There was just a tenseness around his shoulders that hadn't abated since picking me up. It was the only indication he was actually alive. Otherwise, I'd probably assume he was their last victim. A dead body in the front seat, me soon to be the second.

Stop it, Lena, now you're talking crazy. They're not going to hurt you. They're just strange.

I tried to convince myself of that as I leaned back in my seat. It didn't help that someone's water bottle lay on the floor. The sloshing sound beckoned me.

To ignore the water, I switched my vision. All of their clouds appeared, dancing and flowing together. They were incredibly beautiful in their own, unique way, but they were still different.

Very different.

CHAPTER THREE

About five minutes later, Mica lurched forward in her seat, her eyes glued out the windshield. “It’s just up ahead, a mile on the left.”

“What is?” I snapped my vision back to normal.

“The ranch you’re looking for.”

I eagerly peered ahead, but the headlights only illuminated the road and dark trees. “Are you sure?”

A few minutes later, just as Mica promised, a ranch appeared. Moonlight shone over vast open fields that stretched for miles. Fences lined the perimeter, and large, black specks dotted the distant hills. I guessed those were the Black Angus Pete told me about. Di slowed the Suburban.

“Is this it?” Di asked.

“I think so. Pete said his ranch was up this road, and it’s the only ranch so far.”

“Do you know what the name is?” Jasper asked.

Cocking my head, I paused. “Um, I think it was Hollow-way Hills or Hideaway Hills or something like that.”

“The entrance is up there.” Mica pointed.

I looked through the windshield again. “Where?”

“Up on the left.”

“Are you sure? I can’t see a thing.”

“I can see—” A thud sounded, and Mica’s voice died in a muffle. I snapped my gaze to her, but she was rubbing her arm and glaring at Jet.

“You can see what?” I asked.

“Nothing.” A strained smile covered her face. “But I think the entrance is up there.”

Before I could reply, Di sped up, and a classic arched timber entrance appeared like a giant mouth beckoning us to enter. A sign perched at the top. *H . . . H something.*

“Can anyone see the name?” I asked excitedly.

“Hideaway Hills,” Mica answered promptly.

“This has to be it.” I grinned. “Thanks a lot for the ride. You can drop me off here. I’ll walk up the road.”

“No!” Mica and Jacinda shouted at the same time.

I leaned back, wide-eyed.

“We’ll drive you up there,” Di said. “It would be rude to leave you in the dark.”

Jacinda and Mica now smiled sweetly as if their loud outburst never happened. I reminded myself *nothing* about this group was normal.

We crept slowly up the drive. Lights shone at the top, illuminating a few buildings. Gravel crunched under the tires, and the breeze coming in through someone’s window carried sounds of chirping crickets and a distant owl.

When we reached the top, Di put the Suburban into park. Off to the right stood a large, well-lit two story house with a wide, wraparound porch and a hanging swing in the corner. A sign over the front door read, *“Y’all come back now, ya hear.”*

“That looks like the main house,” I said. “I can get out here. You really don’t need to wait.”

Di’s dark eyes flashed in the rearview mirror. She turned off the Suburban. “We’ll wait. Just in case you can’t find your friend.” From her tone, I knew there was no point arguing.

Mica grinned as I opened the door. She tucked a strand of brown hair behind her ear. “Want me to come with you?”

“If you want.”

We jumped out and walked along a stone pathway cut into the yard. Nighttime crickets chirped, and the wooden steps creaked softly underfoot when we climbed the porch. Once at the front door, I knocked and fervently hoped I’d find Pete. If I didn’t, I’d likely never see my backpack again. My stomach plummeted. I didn’t want to consider that possibility.

Muffled footsteps sounded on the other side. The door opened, revealing an older woman wiping her hands on an apron. Her gray hair swept back into a bun. Several wispy strands escaped to frame her cherub cheeks and warm hazel eyes.

“Hello.” She smiled and opened the door wider. The smells of home cooking wafted in the air. Roast beef and freshly-baked bread. I licked my dry lips. I didn’t think I’d ever smelled anything more appetizing. Her eyebrows rose. “Can I help you?”

Focus, Lena . . .

"I hope so." I slapped a hand over my stomach when it rumbled loudly. "I'm trying to find a man named Pete. Does he live here?"

The woman smiled brightly. "Pete Henderson? He certainly does. And who may you be?"

I sighed in relief. "I'm Lena. Pete gave me a ride into Little Raven earlier today, but I left my backpack in his truck. I'm hoping he still has it."

"Lena!" She opened the door wider and looked me up and down. "Pete told me about you. Said you traveled all the way to Little Raven by hitchhiking. Such a bold thing to do these days, m'dear. You're lucky to have made it in one piece."

She ushered us inside and closed the door behind us. The heavenly scents floated stronger in the entryway. "I'm Val, by the way, Pete's wife." She held out her hand. "It's lovely to meet you."

Everyone thought hitchhiking was dangerous, and they were right. I wasn't so stupid I didn't know that, but I did have an advantage. I switched my vision as I took her hand.

Val's cloud appeared as we shook. I almost gasped. Long and thick, like a cloak, her white cloud swept around her shoulders and trailed down her back in a waterfall. I'd never met anybody with a cloud like that. I smiled. I couldn't help it. Val had a rare soul: kind, pure and with no hint of malice. I sighed in relief. I knew Val would never hurt me, but more than that, I knew she'd *help* me.

"Are you okay?" Val dropped my hand.

I switched my vision back to normal. "Um, yes, fine."

My stomach rumbled again as a hint of dizziness swept through me. It suddenly felt very hot, but I shook it off. "And I'm sorry for interrupting your evening, but I need my bag back. I hope you understand."

Val swished her hand in the air. "Of course, it's all right. I'm just sorry you had to come all the way out here to get it." Val turned to Mica. "And who may you be?"

Mica said something, but I barely heard her response. I felt so light headed. I put a hand on my forehead and took a deep breath. *Is the room spinning?*

"Come on in." Val waved us forward. "I'll go find Pete."

I took a step but swayed. It felt as though the entire earth moved. Reaching a hand out, I grabbed hold of a small table in the entry.

“Are you okay, dear?” Val stepped closer, frowning. “You look so pale.”

“No, I’m always pale,” I mumbled, but I swear the room really *was* spinning.

“Lena?” Mica said. “Are you all right?”

Her voice became distant, muffled. Everything went fuzzy. I blinked rapidly a few times, but my vision wouldn’t focus. The next thing I knew, the floor rushed up to greet me and then . . .

Blackness.

CHAPTER FOUR

I floated in darkness. I figured I must be dreaming. For starters, warmth and wonderful smells surrounded me. Normally, my unwashed skin, exhaust, and the unique smells that came with vehicle interiors were what I lived with. But the scents floating through the air hinted at cooked food, an undercurrent of pine-scented cleaning detergent, and . . . tangerines?

"Lena?" a deep voice said. "Can you hear me?"

My body stiffened. Awareness slid through me like a gentle caress. That voice. I *knew* that voice.

I opened my eyes, but any hope and longing I'd felt vanished. An entire circle of people stared down at me. I would have jolted back, but a hard surface pressed against my head.

"Lena!" Mica exclaimed.

I blinked a few times and tried to comprehend what I was looking at. The ceiling light gave it away. It seemed I was lying on a floor, and a crowd of people circled around and above me, like a football team huddling.

"Lena, are you all right?" Di asked.

I frantically searched their faces. That voice. The deep one. Whose had it been? Did I dream it?

Lifting a palm to my head, I tried to figure out who was who and what happened. The huddling group came from the Suburban. I remembered that much. Di, Jacinda, Mica, Jet, Jasper and a man I didn't recognize. My eyes widened when I saw him. He abruptly pulled back.

I tried to sit up to see where he'd gone, but my head pounded.

"Take it easy." Di forced me back down. "You fainted and hit your head."

I rubbed my temple. *Fainted? Hit my head?* Well, that explained the pounding headache. I tried to see past her to where the man had gone, but she blocked my view.

"Do you remember what happened?" she asked.

I continued rubbing my head as memories surfaced. Meeting Pete. Traveling to Little Raven. The instinct roaring to life. Walking along the county road. Meeting this group. Finding Pete's ranch. Feeling lightheaded in the entryway. Falling.

I groaned. I *had* fainted.

"Do you remember now?" Di asked.

"Yeah."

"Good. Now tell me, when did you last drink something?"

I propped myself up on my elbows, wincing. "Um, this morning. I had a cup of coffee."

Di's frown deepened. "A cup of coffee? That's it?"

I nodded.

Her eyes widened. "You mean you walked all that way today without one drink?"

"Um, yeah." My water had run out last night, and while dehydration was nothing new for me, I'd certainly never fainted before.

"We need to get her some water." Di reached down and pinched the skin on the back of my hand. It left a tent of skin poking up. "She's incredibly dehydrated. My guess is her blood pressure is low. It's probably why she fainted."

Val wrung her apron between her hands. "Let's get her to the kitchen."

"Flint?" Di looked at someone behind Val. "Will you carry her?"

"I don't need to be carried . . ." My words died when the strange man appeared again. He hovered above me, just like the others. My gaze widened as I stared up into his deep-set, dark eyes. They were so dark they were almost black, but flecks of brown speckled the irises. I scanned the rest of his face. Tanned skin, a smooth brow, firm lips and a straight, if long nose. Chestnut-colored hair streaked with gold covered his head.

He was *beautiful*.

"Do you mind if I pick you up?" he asked.

The deep tone of his voice reverberated through me. It was *him*. The one I heard when I thought I was dreaming. His voice raised goosebumps along my arms.

"Um . . . no . . . I mean, sure."

He reached down and cupped his arms under my back and knees. My eyes widened. I knew who he was. Di had called him Flint. Flint was the

man from the Suburban. The one in the front seat who'd refused to acknowledge me.

He lifted me without the slightest hitch and walked toward the kitchen. I was acutely aware of every inch of him, the hard feel of his arms, the steady thud of his heart, the way his fingers curled gently yet firmly around my legs.

His scent fluttered to me as he walked liquidly across the floorboards. Val walked ahead, nervously chatting. I barely heard her since I was so consumed with Flint. Leaning closer, I hesitantly inhaled his scent. Spice, wood, and something else. I inched closer.

Tangerines.

My body jumped to life, as if someone ran a jolt of electricity through me. Wide-eyed, I studied him, but he continued walking, apparently oblivious to my erratic reaction.

I searched his face, looking for something, anything, that would trigger a memory. *Do I know him?* No, that wasn't possible. He'd never mentioned us meeting before.

"She can have a seat here," Val said as Flint strode into the kitchen.

He walked to a kitchen chair. I already dreaded when he'd set me down. I didn't know why, but I didn't want him to let go. An emotion I'd never experienced before was growing steadily in me with each step he took. His warm arms and steady breathing only made it increase. It wasn't until he leaned down to set me on the chair that I finally understood what it was.

I'm safe. Flint makes me feel safe.

Still refusing to meet my eyes, Flint let go. An emptiness consumed me.

"Thank you," I managed.

He didn't reply. Instead, he walked to the opposite wall and leaned against it, looking anywhere but at me. Similar to our ride in the Suburban, once again, he ignored me.

My stomach plummeted. The high that coursed through me vanished like a fire being doused with water. Why was he ignoring me? His behavior shouldn't hurt but it did.

Maybe I hit my head harder than I thought.

Everyone else crowded in the kitchen. Val retrieved a glass from a walnut cabinet and hurriedly filled it. I forced myself to ignore Flint and

drink. I emptied the glass in mere seconds, my gulps audible.

"Thank you." I wiped my mouth.

Di placed her hands on her hips. "She needs more than that."

Val grabbed the empty glass. "I'll get another."

Three glasses later, I finally felt sated. Just as I was about to thank Val again, Pete walked in.

"Well, I'll be." Pete put his hands on his hips and eyed everyone in the kitchen. Di stood beside me while the twins, Mica and Jacinda hovered near the counter. Flint still stood by the opposite wall. It didn't escape my notice that Flint's location was the one place in the kitchen that put the most distance between us.

When Pete's gaze met mine, he grinned. "Lena, what the heck are you doin' here? Did you decide to take me up on my offer?"

"Not exactly."

Val gave Pete a scolding look. "No, dear. She forgot her backpack in your truck. She walked almost all the way here to get it."

Pete's expression fell. "You did?"

My eyes darted toward Flint again. The ceiling must be fascinating since he now stared at that. "Yeah, I walked for a few hours, but then this group came along and picked me up."

Pete sighed. "Darn, that's a long walk."

Before I could reply, Di interrupted. "Lena, when did you last eat?"

Flint's gaze shifted to me. Once again, that unreadable expression covered his face.

"Lena?" Di prompted.

"Um, this morning. I had two sandwiches."

"And before that?" Di asked.

"When did I eat before that?"

She nodded.

I cocked my head, trying to recall. Yesterday I'd been riding with a trucker from Nebraska. Before that, I'd spent five days wandering around the plains since the instinct had led me astray for a while. During that time, I'd eaten at a diner with a nice woman named Cindy. I perked up. That was when I'd last eaten.

"Maybe two or three days ago."

Di's eyes widened. "Two or three *days* ago? You've barely eaten anything for the past three days?"

“That’s right.”

She rolled her eyes. “Well, no wonder you fainted and are so skinny. You’re not only dehydrated, but you were probably ketotic prior to this morning.”

“Ketotic?”

Di sighed. “Glucose is the sole source of energy for your brain, so in the absence of glucose in your diet, your body is forced to find an alternate food source. It converts fat cells into ketones—”

“Huh?” I interrupted.

“Never mind. You should eat something.”

“That’s something we can take care of!” Val bustled to a large, six-burner stove and pulled on a pair of hot-mitts that were sitting on the stone countertop. “Have the rest of you eaten supper yet?”

One by one, everyone shook their heads.

“In that case, you’re all going to eat. I have plenty of leftovers from the supper meal. Now, go on out to the dining room. Pete will show you the way. Go on now, out you go!” She made a swishing movement with her hands before opening the oven. More heavenly scents emerged from it.

“Come on, Lena, let’s go.” Di pulled out my chair.

I concentrated on standing. I still felt embarrassingly weak from all of the walking at high altitude that afternoon. Placing my palms on the table’s smooth surface, I tried to cover up how shaky I felt.

“Are you okay?” Di’s long, tanned fingers reached out.

I pulled away. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Okay, but take it easy.”

Despite my protesting muscles, I stood. That was a mistake. It felt as if the entire floor moved beneath me. The next thing I knew, hands were on me—very large warm hands that felt rough and oddly pleasant.

Flint stared down at me as he gripped my upper arms. He’d moved so fast I hadn’t seen him coming. I had the ridiculous urge to stare at him but managed to avert my gaze to his nose.

“Thank you.”

He didn’t reply.

“Do you need Flint to carry you again?” Di asked.

Her question snapped me back to reality. Even though I’d loved the feel of Flint’s arms around me, it was embarrassing that he’d carried me. Normally, I was quite capable of taking care of myself.

“No, I’m fine,” I replied.

The instant I said that, Flint let go. My entire body screamed in protest, but then a sudden sense of self-consciousness filled me. I looked down and saw myself the way he must be seeing me: greasy crimson curls, pale grimy skin, and an undernourished almost skeletal frame. Not to mention, dirt caked every inch of my clothes, and they hung on me. I was a mess, and I smelled. No wonder he’d let go.

My cheeks burned.

“Come on, let’s go,” Di said. “Clear the way.”

THE ROOM WE entered spanned half the house. I guessed it wasn’t really a dining room, though. It had probably once been a large living area or even a ballroom.

The vaulted roof had large wooden support beams. A huge chandelier made of antlers hung from the ceiling. The room was decorated in traditional western theme. Framed pictures of horses, Native Americans, and mountain landscapes hung on the walls. Various types of ranch equipment decoratively garnished the shelves and corners. Dozens of tables and chairs filled the room. Some tables could only sit two or four, others sat twelve to fourteen.

I knew the tables accommodated the guests. In addition to running cattle, Pete had told me they ran a guest ranch. Every night the guests ate in their home.

It felt as if a lightbulb flipped on.

I knew why Val had such large appliances in the kitchen and why she’d had enough leftovers to feed all of us. Pete said their ranch could entertain thirty guests. Val probably did all the cooking.

“Come on, have a seat over here.” Di steered me toward the table Pete stopped at. It was one of the larger ones. She plopped me down on a middle seat and walked around to the opposite end. Jacinda pulled out the chair beside me, and Mica took the chair on my other side.

“I’ll go find your bag.” Pete hooked a thumb on his jeans. His belt buckle gleamed in the light. “I’m real sorry about that, Lena.”

“No big deal. Thanks, Pete.”

He walked back to the kitchen.

“So you really haven’t eaten much for three days?” Mica asked.

“Yeah. Two, three days, something like that.”

“Wow,” she murmured. “I’ve never gone a day without eating, except for that first day. That day—”

“So, Lena!” Jacinda interrupted. She said it so loudly I jumped. An overly bright smile covered her face. “Tell me more about yourself. What do you do when you’re not hitchhiking?”

Great. More personal questions. Just what I need.

“Um, nothing really,” I replied.

“But before you started traveling, you must have done something,” she said, still smiling.

The twins pulled out the chairs directly opposite to me. Di still sat near the end.

One of the twins met my gaze. I switched my vision. From his cloud’s yellow color, I knew it was Jasper. Snapping my sight back to normal, I let my eyes wander toward the kitchen, but my gaze didn’t get far, because a few chairs down was *him*. At some point in the past few seconds, Flint had sat at the very end of the table, beside Di.

I reached up to straighten my hair. My fingers threaded through thick curls but got stuck in a snarl. I tried to gracefully extract them but ended up pulling out a few strands. If anything, I made my hair messier.

Not that it mattered.

Once again, Flint ignored me. He and Di had their heads dipped toward one another as they whispered. A brief surge of envy pummeled me. It was not an emotion I was used to feeling.

“Lena?” Jacinda asked.

“Oh, um, not really,” I finally replied to her question about my personal interests.

Jasper eyed my left, inner wrist and cocked an eyebrow. “Surely, you’ve got some hobby? Tattoos maybe?”

I shoved my hand under the table. “No. I’m not into tattoos.”

“Wasn’t that one on your wrist?” Jet eyed his brother and Jacinda.

“Oh, well . . .” The tattoo on my wrist was another thing I couldn’t explain. It was a symbol. A circle divided into four quarters. I hadn’t noticed it until the second day after I woke up.

“It’s nothing,” I finally said. “Just a pen mark.”

Jacinda frowned. A myriad of expressions crossed the twins’ features —a tilt of a smile, the slight nod of a head, a raised eyebrow. A second later, it stopped.

“Whatever you say.” Jasper smiled, his blue eyes twinkling.

“Yeah.” Jet smirked. “Whatever you say.”

Thankfully, before anyone could ask anything else, Mica approached the table with glasses and a pitcher of water. I hadn’t noticed she’d left. She practically slammed the drinks down. “Drink up, everyone,” she said cheerfully.

I didn’t need the encouragement. I gulped down another full glass. It hit my empty stomach like a water balloon splatting on a sidewalk. I filled it again and avoided the urge to study Flint and Di over the rim of the glass. They were *still* whispering.

“So, Lena.” Mica angled her chair my way. Her brown hair brushed along her shoulders with the movement. I cringed inwardly, wondering what she’d ask. “Is your bag all you’re traveling with?”

I made a noncommittal noise and took another drink.

Mica frowned. “That’s all you have?”

“Yep.”

I felt more eyes at the table assess me. Jacinda frowned, the expression causing tiny wrinkles to mar her otherwise smooth forehead.

“How many clothes do you own?” Jacinda asked.

“Um, a few shirts and two pairs of pants.”

“That’s it?” Jasper said.

“That’s it.”

Jet leaned back, frowning. A dark curl fell on his forehead. He pushed it back.

Thankfully, before the Inquisition got into full swing, Val appeared. “Here you go, m’dear.”

She placed a steaming plate of food in front of me. Roast beef, mashed potatoes, an assortment of roasted veggies, and a large soft roll filled the plate. A hefty portion of gravy covered the meat and potatoes. The smell was unbelievably appetizing.

Val pulled plates off the tray she carried and served everyone else, but I couldn’t wait for the entire table to receive their meals. My focus became entirely on the food. I picked up my fork and took a big bite. Rich gravy and mashed potatoes coated my tongue.

It was quite possibly the best moment of my life.

The next ten minutes were a blur. I had no idea what the group talked about, maybe the food, or the weather, or whatever people normally spoke

about at dinner. As for me, all I saw was my fork and the food in front of me. I'd never tasted anything so good, or so satisfying, and it disappeared much too fast.

"Hungry?" a voice asked.

I snapped my head up.

Jet watched me, a smirk on his face.

My cheeks flamed. I'd probably just resembled a front-end loader hard at work shoveling.

"Yeah," I replied sheepishly. I peeked at *him* again, but Flint was still oblivious. I tried not to stare, but he was so gorgeous, it was hard not to. Once again, I wondered at my strange reaction to him. Even though he ignored me and sat at the end of the table, I still felt safe. *Bizarre*.

Jacinda eyed my empty plate. "You really have been starving, haven't you?"

"Obviously." Mica snorted. "Look at her."

I shrank inward, pulling my thin arms and lean legs into a pretzel. "Well, that's what happens when you're homeless."

A few pieces of cutlery fell from people's grasps. The clatter when it hit the table echoed in the room.

"But how can you not have any money for hotel rooms?" Mica asked.

"Yeah," Jet piped in. "Surely, you have *money*?" He waggled his eyebrows.

The questions started up again, but this time focused on finances. Why in the world would they ask me about money? Did I look like someone with rolls of hundreds in my pocket?

Sinking into my seat, I wished I could disappear underneath it. Suddenly, I felt very tired. The entire day had been completely exhausting, and this group wasn't helping.

"Enough." Flint stared at everyone through hard, dark eyes.

For whatever reason, the mood around the table abruptly changed. Jacinda smiled brightly and told me she loved my top, but since it was full of tattered holes I wondered if I heard her right. Jasper offered me the rest of his potatoes, Jet continued to smirk, and Mica spooned her zucchini onto my plate before I could protest.

"I don't like zucchini." She set her plate down.

I shook my head and finished the rest of her unwanted vegetables. However, I declined Jasper's continual offers to give me his food. As

hungry as I was, I wasn't *that* pathetic.

Throughout it all, Flint watched everyone, his hard dark gaze unsettling and comforting at the same time. It was entirely bizarre. When the conversation switched to tomorrow's forecast, he rose and slipped into the kitchen. I watched him go, admiring his strong legs and wide shoulders.

"You done?" Val smiled down at me. She held out a hand, her hazel eyes sparkling. A light sheen covered her forehead.

"Yes, thank you." I forced myself to stop watching Flint.

Val moved around the table, collecting everyone's dishes.

Just as she finished, Pete strolled into the dining hall with my bag and Flint in tow. I stood so abruptly my chair scraped loudly against the floor. I raced to Pete, grabbed my pack before he could say anything and knelt down. I opened the zippered front pocket.

A relieved sigh escaped me.

It was still there.

My fingers curled around the smooth metal. I carefully extracted the white gold chain bracelet. It glinted in the light. My eyes misted over when I grasped the small charm dangling from the chain. The heart-shaped charm held an inscription reading, *Love You Forever*, etched into its side. The bracelet was the only piece of jewelry I'd been wearing when I woke in Rapid City.

The only proof that someone, somewhere, cared for me.

An emotion, so deep it was silly, coursed through me. In reality, this was simply a piece of metal. Useless. Unable to serve me in any way. But to me, it was so much more than that. Someone in this world knew me and was possibly looking for me. The charm proved that I wasn't completely alone.

I blinked back the tears before anyone saw them. Putting the bracelet back in the pocket, I zippered it carefully closed. I did that every time after I admired the small piece of jewelry, so I knew I wouldn't lose it. The chain was so fragile. A sharp snag and I knew the clasp would break.

I stood and slung my backpack over my shoulder. It was time to head out. Little Raven waited. "Thank you, Pete and Val. I really appreciate the great meal, but I best be going."

"Go where?" Val asked.

"Back to Little Raven."

“But your friend just booked two cabins for the night,” Pete said. “Besides, I told you that you could stay here.”

“What friend?” I asked.

Flint crossed his arms. My body turned toward him, as if on its own accord. I felt it again, that strange feeling of safety. *What is it about this guy?*

“I booked cabins for all of us,” Flint said. “Including you.”

My tongue refused to work as I stared up at him.

“You don’t need to leave,” Flint added quietly. Something flickered in his gaze, but it disappeared before I could decipher it. “You can stay here tonight, and we’ll give you a ride back into town tomorrow.”

“You will?”

“Yes.”

My will instantly crumbled. I was surprised at how quickly it happened. I forgot that I was dirty and unsightly, and I completely forgot how important it was for me to get back to Little Raven. Unconsciously, I took a step toward him. Realizing what I was doing, I stopped myself.

“Um, okay.” I tried to sound more coherent, but his eyes disrupted all electrical activity in my brain.

“Glad that’s settled.” Pete sighed. “Now, if y’all follow me, I’ll take you to your cabins for the night.”

One by one, everyone stood. Slowly, the tension eased. I didn’t know why everyone was so tense to begin with. I sneaked a glance at Flint again. Even though he walked on the other side of the group, I still felt him, actually *felt* him, like a subtle undercurrent of energy flowed out of him.

I shook my head. I must have been more sleep deprived than I thought. Nobody could pour out energy, and whatever it was that caused my strange reaction to him, it couldn’t create energy between us.

Or could it?

CHAPTER FIVE

After Pete led us to the cabins, he bid us goodnight. The entire group crowded into the living room of one cabin, even though the guys had rented the cabin next door.

I shuffled uncertainly among them and tried not to admire Flint's height. He was easily the tallest in the group. I barely came to his shoulders. Luckily, he and Di were whispering again so he didn't notice my curious stares. Everyone else eyed me, though. Mica seemed particularly interested in cornering me, if her grin and shining brown eyes were any indication.

I scooted out of the room to check out the sleeping arrangements before Mica could pounce.

Two bedrooms filled the back of the cabin—one with two sets of bunk beds, the other with two queen beds—plenty of room for Jacinda, Mica, Di and me. I spent longer than necessary in the bedrooms, giving everyone time to break up for the night.

When I returned to the living room, though, everyone still sat on the couches. Apparently, nobody was turning in.

Mica and Jacinda *both* looked up expectantly when I stepped into the room. Jacinda even scooted over to make room for me on the couch.

Great. Now what do they want to know? I groaned inwardly thinking about the questions to come.

"Um, I think I'm gonna clean up." I made a beeline for the bathroom and closed the door behind me. Part of me wanted to sink against the door and crumble to the floor. Between the stress of today, my reaction to Flint, and this strange group, exhaustion filled me to the core. However, if I did pass out again that would bring the cavalry running.

I sighed and pushed away from the door.

The only good thing about being trapped in this tiny room? I could shower. Crisp, white towels and complimentary soaps and shampoos garnished the shelves. My eyes landed on the tub, shower combo.

I didn’t waste any time stripping my clothes. When I stepped under the shower’s hot spray, I understood for the first time what bliss felt like. I was currently well fed, had a roof over my head and was now taking a hot shower. Never in the four months of my known existence had I ever experienced any of those three.

I showered for a long time. Longer than I needed to. Partly, because it felt so good, but also because I wanted to avoid more probing questions.

By the time I stepped out, the water had cooled, and thick steam covered the mirror. I ran my hand over the glass. The image staring back at me left me dumbstruck.

I was clean, actually *clean*.

My complexion was paler than I’d realized. White skin, sprinkled with a dusting of freckles across my nose, and large green eyes stared back at me. I turned my head a few times, taking advantage of being able to study myself like this. Before, I’d always been covered in dirt and grime.

Turning my torso, I was surprised at how long my hair was. Long, crimson locks hung down my back in damp waves. Without filth coating them, they sprung up when I pulled a few strands. Since I didn’t have a comb, I ran my fingers through my hair. Luckily, since I used so much conditioner, they easily threaded through.

Despite being clean, my face was still frighteningly thin and my ribs and hip bones jutted out. Sighing, I put my filthy clothes back on, turned off the light and eased the door open. I stopped short when I rounded the corner. *All* of them still waited in the living room, even Flint.

Jet let out a whistle. “Look at you, Red. You sure clean up well.”

“Oh, um, thanks.”

Di sat near Flint. Her dark eyes trained on me. “Want to talk for a little bit?”

I gulped. *Talk? Is that what they call the grilling questions?* “Ah . . . I’m going to turn in. It’s been a long day.”

I hurried past them and escaped into the first bedroom off the hallway. It was the room with bunk beds. Stripping everything off except my shirt, I leaped onto the top bed and dove under the covers. The feel of them temporarily distracted me. They were soft and smooth.

Turning on my side, I stared at the wall. A few minutes passed and my heart rate slowed. My lids actually started to close as exhaustion set in

when I heard the door open. I stiffened but made myself relax and fake a few snores.

"Lena?" I recognized Mica's voice. Quiet footsteps approach the bed. "Lena?" she said louder.

I let out a few deep breaths and a soft snore. I felt her presence close to the bed and had no idea what she wanted. I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

Mica eventually sighed and turned. She padded to the door and closed it. Darkness once again enveloped the room. I let out a sigh of relief. A few more minutes passed and when I realized nobody would be bothering me again, I sank into oblivion.

I BOLTED AWAKE. Darkness surrounded me. It took a second to get my bearings. I wasn't outside. That was obvious from the lack of wind, smells and nighttime sounds. So if I wasn't outside, where was I?

I ran my fingers along something rough yet soft. Whatever it was, I lay on it. Frowning, I felt the bumps and grooves and eventually deduced that I was on a couch. *How the heck did I get on a couch?*

Fumbling in the dark, I found a light switch on a table lamp. The room flooded with harsh light, revealing several couches, a small kitchenette, and rustic decorations.

The cabin!

It all came crashing back. The ride with Pete, meeting the group and going to sleep in the cabin. But I'd gone to sleep in a bed. I was sure of it. The top bunk in one of the bedrooms to be precise. I groaned as I realized how I'd gotten out here.

I sleepwalked again.

Over the past four months, I'd sleepwalked a few times, usually when I went to bed late in a particularly strange place. I sighed. At least I hadn't wandered outside.

I turned the light off and fumbled my way back to the bedroom. Soft snores greeted me. It appeared Mica was asleep in the lower bunk. Red, glowing numbers on the bedside clock drew my attention. 2:17. It was essentially the middle of the night.

Instead of returning to bed, I paused. My thoughts drifted to what I'd discovered only twelve hours ago.

Little Raven.

I knew Flint said they'd give me a ride into town that morning, but morning felt like a long way off. Answers possibly lay in Little Raven roughly fifteen miles away. *Fifteen miles*. That was it.

That distance would only take about five hours of walking, maybe a little more since the terrain varied so much. And even though this group said they'd give me a ride, what if they slept in? Or, what if they changed their minds? Then what? I'd have wasted another half day waiting for others to help me when I could have done it myself. Five hours from now, the group probably wouldn't be up, but *I* could be striding into the town center.

I silently collected my things.

COLD WIND AND nighttime sounds filled the air on my walk back to the county road. Crickets chirped, distant owls hooted, and an occasional coyote or wolf howled in the night. The chilly breeze felt alive in its own way. It caressed my skin, getting shivers out of me until I set a steady pace.

I'd put my warmest clothes on: a ragged sweatshirt, knit cap, and my worn jeans. They kept me warm enough until I disappeared into the forest. Then, darkness enveloped me, and the temperature plummeted.

I kept my eyes on the light-colored road in front of me. Moonlight filtered through the canopy, illuminating the gravel. Still, the darkness dominated the forest. Without city lights and interstate traffic headlights, the world became an inky sea at night.

As gravel crunched underfoot with every step I took, my thoughts inevitably drifted to Flint. His image swam in my mind. That beautiful, chestnut-colored hair, those dark eyes flecked with gold, and a firm mouth that seemed ready to tense at any moment. I sighed. I had no idea why he pulled at me like he did, but there was no use thinking about him. I'd never see him again.

I abruptly stopped, my feet skidding in the gravel. *I'll never see him again.*

I breathed in and out deeply a few times. I even closed my eyes. Cold air pierced my lungs and eventually cleared my head.

Just forget him, Lena! The instinct had led me to Little Raven. Therefore, answers lay in Little Raven. It didn't matter that my heart wanted to run back to the ranch. What mattered right now was finding answers. I *needed* to know what happened to me.

I resumed walking and pushed thoughts of Flint farther and farther behind me with every step I took. When dawn finally crested the horizon, the blister on my heel split wide open again. The pain helped. It kept me from thinking of him.

About an hour later, the end of the forest appeared. I hurried until the tree's branches and canopy released me. Morning sun shimmered off the town's rooftops in the distance. I grinned.

I was here.

I PICKED UP a jog and didn't stop until I reached the road going into the town center. A few cars passed me on the street. The sound of distant vehicles filled the quiet. People were waking up, getting ready for work, and heading out for the day. The town grew to life once again as a new day loomed—a day full of possibilities.

I turned down the first street and ducked into a store. A clock hung on the wall. Just past eight. For a brief second, I pictured Flint waking up, stretching in bed, his large hands running through his hair. I pushed the image away. *Not important, Lena!*

It appeared I'd entered an outdoor store. Bicycles, kayaks and rows of gear stacked the walls. Bright sunlight pierced the store's eastern windows as an eager shop assistant approached me while I stood there, unmoving. She wore a navy vest sporting the store's logo and didn't look older than sixteen.

"Morning," she said.

"Good morning," I replied.

"Can I help you with anything? We have sales stuff in the back."

"No. I'm not here to buy anything."

She turned to leave, but I reached out. *She'll do.* "Ah, wait, can I ask you something?"

"Sure!" Her smile revealed a mouth full of braces.

"Do you recognize me?"

Her head cocked. "What do you mean?"

"I mean . . ." I leaned closer. "Have you ever seen me before? Or do you know anyone that looks like me?" I fluffed my hair around my shoulders, hoping the noticeable color would jog her memory.

Her eyebrows rose. "Um, no. I guess I don't know what you mean."

“Well, do any of your parents’ friends have a daughter, or sister, or niece, or know someone, that *looks* like me?”

She shook her head. “Uh, no.”

“Are you sure? No one even remotely like me?”

She shook her head again.

“Do you know everyone in town?”

“Yeah. Except for the tourists.” She hooked a thumb at a couple standing in front of a mirror. They were trying on hats. Rather large hats.

“But you don’t know *me*?” I persisted.

“No,” she said firmly.

Her answers weren’t what I hoped for, but I smiled brightly and reasoned she was too young. She probably didn’t know *everyone*.

“Okay, never mind. Thanks for your time.”

“Sure!” She scurried away.

I frowned at how stupid I’d been. I needed to find someone older, who’d been alive longer than a decade, who would recognize me and could tell me where my family lived. I spun around and searched for another employee.

Not spotting anyone, I wandered through the store, dipping between racks of outdoor jackets and peering around walls of biking equipment. At the back of the store, a sales assistant stocked tent bags into cubby holes. Gray hair peppered his head. He also had glasses. Failing eyesight was a good sign.

“Um, excuse me.” I tapped his shoulder.

He turned and smiled pleasantly. The movement lifted his bushy mustache. I waited for recognition to spring into his eyes, but he maintained the same bland expression. “Yes, can I help you?”

“Um, I just wondered, if . . . you . . . recognized me?”

He frowned and pushed his falling glasses up his nose. “Sorry, no. Should I know you?” His wrinkles deepened into a frown.

Perhaps I’d gone too far in the opposite direction. Maybe he had Alzheimer’s, so didn’t recognize *himself* in the morning. I paused. I knew I was being ridiculous. The guy couldn’t be older than sixty. He obviously didn’t know me, and he obviously didn’t have Alzheimer’s.

“No. I thought I recognized you. My mistake,” I replied.

He smiled again and turned back to the shelf he was organizing.

I didn’t move. Surely he would know something. I waited a moment and then tapped his shoulder again.

He turned. “Yes?”

“Can I ask you something else?” I asked bluntly. “This is a small town, right?”

“Yes.”

“Where everyone knows everyone?”

“Yes.”

“But you don’t recognize me?”

He shook his head warily.

“And nobody has gone missing here?”

He shook his head again. “No. Miss, what are you talking about?”

I could tell he was trying to stay polite. “So nobody that meets my description went missing about four months ago?”

“No, not that I know of.”

“No? Are you sure?”

“I’m fairly sure.”

I paused for a minute. *No? Really?*

“Miss, are you okay?” His voice took on a concerned note. He stepped closer.

I forced a smile and backed up before I made a bigger fool of myself. “I’m sorry. I’ll let you get back to work.”

I turned, ran to the front, and out the door. The morning air hit me with cool force. I inhaled a few deep breaths and told myself that maybe the sales assistants at this store were new to town. Maybe they weren’t from here despite what they claimed. That had to be it.

I waited on the sidewalk and tapped my foot on the ground. Surely someone would know me. I knew this place held something. It had to.

I just had to find it.

CHAPTER SIX

An hour later, I stopped asking people if they knew me. I'd wandered into coffee shops, restaurants and other stores, intersecting dozens of people, some tourists. I only talked to the locals. They all claimed to not know me.

I'd kept trying regardless, hoping those I asked had simply forgotten me. However, when I practically scared the socks off an elderly woman, who claimed she'd been born in this town, had never left it, and didn't recognize me or anyone who looked remotely like me, I gave up. Apparently, my anxiety was starting to show. People took one look at me and hurried away.

Fresh air carried in the morning breeze as I stood on the sidewalk. Biting my lip, I considered my options. Maybe Little Raven *didn't* hold people I knew. Maybe something else waited here. Perhaps an object that I was supposed to find?

My shoulders slumped as a pang of remorse struck me. I had hoped for something else entirely, something much more precious.

I had hoped my family lived here.

I buried that longing as deep as it would go. Another sharp stab rocked my core. I ignored it.

It had to be mid-morning by now. Across the road, shop assistants dragged patio furniture outside, propped doors open, and arranged sidewalk signs. Chatter from people talking within the stores filtered out. With each second, the foot traffic increased as the touristy town grew more alive.

Taking a deep breath, I focused. So if it *was* an object I was supposed to find, the only way I could possibly locate it was through the instinct—that subtle feeling that had led me hundreds of miles from Rapid City to here. I could only hope it would lead me to whatever I was supposed to find.

Closing my eyes, I waited for that hum to resonate.

It didn't.

I concentrated harder, searching for something, *anything* that would lead me in the right direction.

Nothing happened.

A car honked. My eyes snapped open, and I jumped back. I'd almost wandered into an intersection. I hurried back to the sidewalk and retreated into an alleyway by a brick building. Pungent scents from a nearby dumpster filled the air. I wrinkled my nose but stayed put.

Away from the commotion, I closed my eyes. This time I retreated to that calm place within. The place that always made the instinct hum to life.

Breathe in, breathe out. It's got to be in here somewhere.

Nothing.

Clenching my hands into fists, I took another deep breath. Hyperventilating wouldn't help. I tried again.

Still nothing.

"No!" I whispered.

I dropped my backpack and sank to the ground. Gasping breaths shook me. I huddled on the pavement against the brick building. The ground was cold through my jeans as I drew my knees up. I didn't care.

Where was the instinct? Did Little Raven hold nothing for me? Had the instinct been wrong? Had *I* been wrong? Had there ever *been* an instinct? Or was it something I made up to give me purpose?

Tears sprang into my eyes as I cradled my head in my hands. This time, I couldn't stop them. I had no idea what I was going to do. I had counted on finding something here, feeling something, or at least recognizing something, but nothing like that had happened.

I began crying in earnest, silently at first but then my whole body shook. I was completely lost. Lost with no answers, no home, and no way of knowing what to do next.

Wrapping my arms around my shins, I laid my head against my knees and sobbed. Cold tears streamed down my cheeks.

To my left, a shuffle of feet came from the sidewalk, as if someone skidded to a stop. "Thank God," someone murmured. "Shh. It's okay."

The next thing I knew, strong warm arms encircled me. Before I had a chance to react, I was lifted from the ground. I began to flail and opened my mouth to scream, but the sight that greeted me left me speechless.

Flint's dark, bottomless eyes gazed down at me. "You don't need to say anything."

I didn’t comprehend his words. I just saw his eyes and focused on his voice. I needed to. My insides reeled. I had nothing, absolutely *nothing* and I didn’t see any way it would ever come right.

Flint carried me to the Suburban parked several blocks away. He placed me in the passenger’s seat. I was like a useless doll in his arms, but he folded my limbs carefully and clicked the seat belt in place before tossing my bag in the back.

We were already driving through the forest before I realized we’d left town. I didn’t know how long it took us to return to the ranch. The entire journey was a blur. When we arrived at Hideaway Hills, Flint parked the Suburban outside the cabin, and before I knew what was happening, he was carrying me up the front steps.

I vaguely heard voices around me. A mix of male and female voices with different tones and pitches.

“Lena, are you okay?”

“Thank goodness she didn’t get far!”

“Where’d you find her, Flint?”

Jacinda appeared in front of me. I tried to smile. She looked so pretty in her pink top. I reached out to touch it. So soft.

“Silk,” she whispered and winked.

I was set down on something. It was soft but then something hard pressed against my side. I sank into it. An arm encircled my shoulders and pulled me into the hardness. The next thing I knew, a woman was kneeling in front of me.

“Can you hear me?” Di asked.

I nodded.

“Tell me your name.”

My name? “Lena,” I mumbled.

“Can you tell me where you are?”

Slowly, my foggy brain began functioning. The living room looked familiar, and I sat on a couch. *When did I get back here?* “Um, I’m in the cabin.”

“What cabin?”

“The cabin on the ranch.”

“And what day is it?” she persisted.

I frowned and slowly the wheels in my mind sped up. “Sometime in August?”

She seemed happy with that answer and glanced at someone beside me. “It’s time.”

“Yeah,” a deep voice rumbled. “I know. We should have told her last night, even when she pretended to be sleeping.”

Whoever had spoken sat right beside me. I slowly became aware that his side pressed against mine, and his warm arm encircled my shoulders. I leaned closer. His scent registered. Spice, wood and tangerines.

Flint.

His dark gaze met mine. “Everything’s going to be fine. You’ll see.” His arm tightened around my shoulders, but for the life of me I didn’t understand what he meant.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"Is everyone here?" Di asked.

Jacinda, Mica, Jet and Jasper scooted closer. They'd moved the furniture to form a half circle around me. When had that happened?

"Lena?" Di's dark eyes were so serious. She always seemed serious.

"Yeah?"

"Are you doing okay?"

"Sure." But I wasn't okay. I was anything but okay. Everything I'd been working toward for the past four months had been for nothing. Absolutely nothing. My throat tightened.

"You need to focus," Di said. "This is important. We have something to tell you."

"What?"

She paused. "Let's start with this, what brought you to Colorado?"

What brought me to Colorado? Are they really going to start with the questions again? For a moment, I didn't answer, but Di's gaze held mine and she eventually raised her dark eyebrows.

"I dunno. Just traveling around." I gave her the response I gave all strangers when asked that question. Soon, I'd be saying things like that again. Just as soon as I figured out what to do, or where to go from here. The tightness clenched around my throat again.

"So, there wasn't a special reason?" Di persisted.

I shook my head.

Her frown deepened. "I know it's hard to tell the truth. We all felt like you when we met the group. Untrusting. Guarded. Scared of so many unknowns, but there's something you need to know. We all came here for the same reason as you. To find something."

I stiffened. "What did you think you'd find?"

"Answers that would explain who we are and what happened to us four months ago."

I stared at her. Numb shock crept through me.

“Did you really come out here to travel? Or were you hoping to find something too?”

I shook my head, the movement clumsy. *How does she know?*

“Trust us,” Flint whispered. His scent swam around me. Something in me calmed. The feeling of being completely safe cloaked my skin, and I floated back to the surface of reality.

“How did you know?” I asked Di.

She smiled. “Because you’re one of us.”

“One of you?”

Di took her watch off. The others did the same. It struck me how this group seemed very concerned with keeping time. They all wore watches on their left wrists.

“May I see your wrist?” Di asked.

I held out my left arm. My thin, white limb appeared ghostly beside Di’s olive complexion.

Di pulled my forearm into her lap and flipped it over. She traced the tattoo on my left inner wrist. The small symbol, a perfect circle divided into quarters, looked like a pie cut into four pieces. I’d had the tattoo since that first morning. Another mystery I couldn’t solve.

“Where did you get this?” she asked. The tattoo was small, maybe a centimeter in diameter and done in fine print, dark ink.

“Um, I don’t know,” I answered honestly. “I’ve always just had it.”

“I’ve got one too.” She flipped her left wrist over, the one she always wore a watch on.

Her left, inner wrist revealed a different symbol. It was also done in the same fine print ink and about a centimeter in diameter. Hers was different. Instead of a circle divided into quarters, it was a full circle with a cross attached to the outside circle’s perimeter.

“You have one too?” I asked incredulously. “Isn’t that the symbol for a female?”

“It is.”

“And I’ve got the symbol for a male.” Flint flipped his left arm over, revealing a tattoo like Di’s, but instead of the cross attached to the circle, there was an arrow.

“When did you get those?” I asked.

“We’ve always had them,” Di said.

One by one, Jacinda, Mica, Jasper and Jet flipped their wrists over. I leaned forward, shaking my head. They all had tattoos. Tattoos similar in size and ink to mine.

“Mine’s pretty intricate.” Jacinda leaned closer. She had two brackets, back to back, connected by a cross—the cross had a small circle at the bottom of it. Unlike Di and Flint’s, I didn’t recognize hers.

Jet and Jasper had similar symbols. Jasper’s was a curly shaped 4, and Jet’s was a curly shaped lowercase H, except the vertical line in the *h* had a horizontal bar through the top. I didn’t recognize theirs either.

Mica’s shining brown eyes met mine when I studied her symbol. It was a U with an upside down cross slashed through it vertically.

“Do you see what I’m trying to tell you?” Di said. “You’re one of us. We’re just like you. We all woke up four months ago in various cities around the U.S. with no memory of who we are or where we came from, and we all had these tattoos. Isn’t that what happened to you?”

My eyes widened.

“You felt the *pull* too, didn’t you? The desire to search for something, ever since that first morning?”

I sat numbly, too shocked to speak. *The pull? Was she talking about the instinct?*

“We all felt that *pull* to travel here and search for answers. That’s what brought us here,” Di continued.

I paused and stared at her warily. Was it possible this wasn’t a game? That what she said was true? I glanced at Flint.

His dark, solemn eyes regarded me steadily, and I knew, *knew* to the deepest part of my soul, that he wouldn’t lie to me. I didn’t know how I knew that, but I did. What Di had said was real.

“But how does that make any sense?” I asked.

“It doesn’t,” she said. “We were hoping to find answers here too, but so far, we haven’t found anything.”

I shook my head. “Wait a minute. How did you all find each other? How come I’ve been alone all these months but none of you have been?”

Di put her watch back on. “We were alone too, at first. When we woke up we were hundreds of miles away from one another, but then we found each other.”

“How?”

“Is there something you can do, that makes you different from everyone else?” she asked, ignoring my question.

“What do you mean?”

She waved her hand. “Like an ability? Or a gift? Something that’s unique to you, that only you can do?”

I knew what she was asking. I thought about what I could do, the thing that made me different.

I let my gaze go fuzzy. Colorful clouds appeared around all six of them. I snapped my vision back to normal. “How do you know about that?”

“We all have special abilities, gifts, as I’ve started to call them. It only makes sense that you have one too.”

“So, what can you do?” I asked warily.

“I can see the future.”

“What?”

“I know, I can’t explain it either, but it’s true. I saw you coming here. Do you understand? I *saw* you. I’ve been seeing you for months, and I knew that you’d be coming to us, here, in Colorado.” She paused. “I thought we’d find you in Little Raven. Yesterday, when we picked you up on the road, it was sheer luck we found you. If Flint hadn’t suggested we drive around, it may have been weeks before I’d been able to pinpoint a location on you again.”

My mouth dropped. The image of their Suburban driving on the county road flashed through my mind. That hadn’t been a coincidence?

“How is that possible?” I asked.

Di shrugged. “How is anything possible?”

“And the rest of you can do other things?”

Jacinda nodded. “For me it’s hearing. I could hear this conversation up at the house if I wanted to.”

“You could?”

“Or I could ignore it. I can turn it on and off.”

“Really? What can you hear now?”

She closed her eyes, her long lashes resting on her cheeks. “There’s a scratching sound under the front porch. It’s small, maybe a mouse.” She cocked her head. “Several conversations in the cabins across the driveway. They’re talking about tomorrow. A humming sound in the distance, it’s a bird flying—”

“She could go on all day,” Mica interrupted.

Jacinda’s eyes flashed open. She shrugged and smiled.

“For me, it’s sight!” Mica pulled my attention to her. “I can see better than any other human.” She grinned.

“How well can you see?”

“I can read twelve point font from three hundred yards.”

I gaped.

Mica grinned broader. “We tried it.”

“If it’s Courier she can read it at three hundred and ten yards,” Jet stated in a bored tone. “But if it’s Perpetua, it’s only two hundred and eighty.”

“*And* I can see in the dark,” Mica added.

“And you two?” I asked the twins.

“Jet and I are telepathic,” Jasper said.

“Telepathic?”

“Yeah, we can read each other’s minds,” Jet explained.

“I know what it means.”

Jasper laughed, apparently finding my stern expression funny. “Jet and I have always been able to communicate with each other, right from the moment we woke up.”

“Seriously?”

“Yeah,” Jasper said. “Imagine how it felt to wake up, not knowing who you are, where you came from, or what you were doing, and to have a voice in your head. Jet even called me *The Voice*. He wouldn’t believe I was a real person until we met.”

Jet rolled his eyes.

I shook my head and thought about that first morning. The cold alleyway, the smells of rotting garbage. I shuddered. I hated thinking about that day. “So what is he thinking right now?”

Jasper eyed his brother. “Right now, he’s wondering how long this will take since we never ate breakfast.”

I glanced at Flint. My breath hitched at the sight. “And you?”

Flint shrugged. “I’m strong and fast.”

Mica laughed loudly. “That’s the understatement of the year.”

Meeting Flint’s gaze, my concentration waned. Once again, I wanted to sink into him, like Alice tumbling down the rabbit hole. I shook myself and then remembered that strange feeling of power I’d sensed in him last night.

“How strong and fast?”

He smiled, affording me a glimpse of perfect, white teeth. “Maybe I’ll show you some time.”

I snapped my gaze away. I needed to be in control of my senses right now. It still hadn’t sunk in, though, what everyone was telling me, that I wasn’t alone. That I wasn’t the only one who’d woken up with no memory of who I was or where I came from. That this strange ability I had didn’t make me unique. That there were others like me.

“What about you, Lena?” Jacinda asked. “What can you do?”

Di leaned forward. Her short dark hair fell across her cheek. She tucked it behind one ear. “What’s your gift? I’ve been dying to know.”

I smiled faintly. Had it really only been eight hours ago that I’d left this cabin to walk back to Little Raven? That now seemed like days.

“Wait a minute,” I said. “Why was I drawn to Little Raven? That’s where the instinct led me, but when I returned this morning, there was nothing there. I couldn’t feel it anymore.”

“We were all drawn to this general area,” Di said. “Although, none of us know why. Once we all found each other, though, the pulling feeling disappeared.”

“So, now that I’m in this area and I found all of you, I *have* found what I was searching for?”

“As far as we can figure, yes,” Di replied.

That would explain why nobody in town knew me and why the instinct had disappeared.

“Well?” Di said impatiently. “What’s your gift?”

I took a breath. “I see clouds, or at least, I call them clouds.”

“Like in the sky?” Jet asked.

“No, around people. I call them clouds because they’re like a haze that surrounds people’s shoulders. They’re not really opaque, more like a wispy fog. It tells me if they’re good or bad, if I can trust them.”

“Like an aura,” Di said, “And you can see that in all of us?”

“Yes, but with all of you it’s different. Normally, people’s clouds are white, gray or black. The whiter the cloud, the better a person’s soul is, the darker the cloud, the eviler a person is. But you’re all different. You all have colors.” I remembered my reaction when I’d first met them on the county road. I’d been so confused by it.

“We do?” Di said.

“Yeah, nobody else has ever had colors before.”

“What colors are we?” Mica asked.

I switched my vision and again marveled at the rainbow display.

“You all have blue in your clouds, but everyone also has a unique color. You have pink mixed with the blue, Mica, and you have violet.” I turned to Jacinda.

“What about mine?” Di asked.

“Gold and blue.”

“And the guys?” Di asked.

“Jet’s blue is mixed with red, Jasper’s with yellow, and Flint’s with orange.”

“So blue mixed with all the colors of the rainbow,” Di commented.

I flipped my vision back to normal. The colorful clouds disappeared.

“Interesting.” Di tapped her finger to her chin.

“What color are you?” Jasper asked.

His question took me completely by surprise. “My color?”

“Yeah. What color’s your cloud?” Jet asked.

I frowned. “Um, I don’t know.”

“How can you not know?” Jet asked.

“Because I’ve never looked at it.”

“You haven’t?” Mica said.

I shook my head, not believing I’d never bothered. “I always assumed it was white. I know I’m a good person, and I never had any reason to think my cloud would be different from anybody else’s.”

“Well, don’t dilly dally!” Mica swished her hand. “Go look!”

I got up and raced to the bathroom mirror. As soon as I switched my vision, what billowed around my shoulders made me smile. A beautiful bright green mixed with blue stared back at me. Any doubt I may have carried over being connected to this group vanished. Di was right. I was one of them.

I returned to the living room, smiling.

“Well?” Mica asked.

“Green and blue.”

“I knew it would be like ours.” Mica grinned.

I sat beside Flint. His arm once again settled over my shoulders. I liked the weight of it. I also liked its possessive feel.

“Okay,” Di said. “Now that you know about us, there’s no need to hide things from you.”

I frowned. “Why did you hide this from me? Why didn’t you tell me right away?”

Jet raised an eyebrow. “Do you not remember your reaction to us?”

“Yeah.” Jasper agreed. “It was pretty obvious you didn’t know what to make of us, and I’ve never seen someone hide her tattoo so fast when we asked about it.”

I ducked my head sheepishly. They were right. After months of hitchhiking and lying about myself to strangers, it had been an instinctual reaction to guard myself against others.

Jacinda put her hand over mine, her honey-brown eyes soft. “What they’re trying to say is that we’ve found it’s easier to wait before we tell a new person. Most of us had similar reactions to yours when we met the group, although, not quite as severe.” She said the last bit in a very soothing voice and patted my hand.

“Sorry,” I mumbled. Maybe if I hadn’t thought they were so strange, I would have been more open to trusting them.

“Don’t be,” Jacinda said. “We all felt untrusting initially.”

“You did?”

Jasper smirked. “Jet punched me when I told him it was me in his head. It’s not like me being his twin gave it away or anything.”

Mica laughed. “He seriously freaked out!”

“We did try to tell you sooner,” Di interjected. “Last night, we wanted to tell you when we got to this cabin, but then you bolted for the bathroom and pretended to go to sleep right after that. It was obvious you weren’t ready.”

“Yeah.” Mica piped in. “They tried telling me right after they picked me up, but I almost jumped out of the vehicle.” She tucked a strand of short, brown hair behind her ear. Apparently, she found this funny now because she grinned.

“I didn’t take it well either,” Jacinda said. “I was told ten minutes after I was picked up, and it was a lot to take in. Can you imagine how you would have felt when we picked you up? If the second the door closed, we showed you our tattoos, or told you we had no memory of who we were, and had been waiting and looking for you? How do you think you would have reacted?”

I tried to picture it. I couldn’t. I was already uncomfortable from what I’d seen in their clouds. Having them spill all of that information on me would have probably had me running for the hills. Literally. I shrugged. “Yeah, I guess it would have made it harder.”

“So we started waiting a few hours, sometimes a day,” Di explained. “Just so the newbies could become used to us and know we’re not crazy.”

I started putting two and two together. “You all arrived here at different times then?”

Di nodded her head. “I got here first, maybe two weeks after I woke up. I kept seeing this place and images of everyone. I knew I needed to find you all and pull us together. After me it was Flint, then Mica followed by Jacinda. After her, it was Jasper, then Jet a few days later. The twins got here about two weeks ago.”

“And now we don’t need to hide anything from you!” Mica stated loudly. “Now we can be ourselves again.”

“That is, until the new girl gets here,” Di warned.

I cocked my head. “The new girl?”

“That’s the other thing,” Di said. “There’s another one of us. She’s coming in a few weeks. She’s the last.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

I sank into the couch. *There are more of us?*

"There's another girl . . . like me? Who's out there right now, trying to follow the *pull*?"

"Yes," Di replied.

"Who is she? Where is she? What's her name?"

Di shook her head. "I don't know her name or who she is, but she looks young and always appears afraid."

"Where's she's coming from?"

"I think Texas, but I'm not sure. She's been on the road for so long, but she's always on a form of public transport. She's done a lot of traveling in the wrong direction."

I frowned. Poor girl. I knew how she felt. It was awful, traveling alone, with no one to help you. The added stress of not having an identity or any idea of *why* you were traveling made it harder.

"I hope she gets here safely," I said.

"She will." Di leaned back and crossed her arms. "In two to three weeks, she'll be here. And unlike you, she doesn't seem impulsive."

"How do you know I'm impulsive?"

Di rolled her eyes. "My visions of you changed rapidly. Every time you made an impulsive decision, my hold on you would disappear. You've been very hard to track."

"Oh." That did sound like me.

"You know, you did disappear in the middle of the night," Mica added.

I remembered my sudden need to find answers, *now*. I nodded sheepishly. "Yeah. I did."

Mica sighed. "Don't make a habit of it. You're not easy to find."

"How did you find me this morning?"

"Flint," Mica said.

Flint shrugged. "I guessed you went back to Little Raven, so I went looking for you."

“More like freaked out, jumped in the car and drove off before any of us could join you,” Mica retorted. “I’ve never seen you panic like that.”

Flint tensed.

He panicked that I disappeared?

“Anyway,” Di said. “Now, that we know you’re safe and we’ve told you about us, we can get on with things until the new girl arrives.”

“Hmm.” I was still reeling that Flint had panicked about me being missing. A warm feeling coated my insides.

“Do you have questions about anything else?” Di asked.

I shook myself, trying to clear my head. “So if you can see the future, do you know what happens to us?”

Di frowned. “Unfortunately, no. I’ve seen snippets of the eight of us in the future, brief visions here and there. In most of them we’re here, on the ranch, so I know we’re not leaving anytime soon, but I know that will eventually change. I’ve had a few visions of us in some desert, but I’m not sure where, and I’ve seen us in a large city or two, but I wasn’t able to see enough to know what cities they were.”

“Oh.” So we’d leave here eventually and all travel somewhere together? “Do you know anything else about our future?”

Di shook her head. “Not at the moment, but that could change. I can’t control my visions. They come as they want and show me things unreliably.”

“Maybe the new girl will know more.” As scary as everything was, I felt better that I wasn’t alone.

“Yeah, don’t count on it.” Jet lounged back in his chair and ran a hand through his dark curly hair. Some dirt fell off his boots when he propped them on the hassock. “Personally, I think we’re all screwed. There’s nothing normal about any of this, and the fact that we can all do something no other human can, seems like a bad omen to me.”

“What do you mean?” I asked warily.

“Jet,” Di interrupted. “We don’t know anything. No need to get anyone worried.”

“Yeah.” Jacinda clasped her hands tightly in her lap. Sharp blue veins stuck out from the backs of her hands. “Di’s right. No one needs to be worried.”

“But don’t tell me you haven’t wondered?” Jet persisted. “Eight people with no memories, matching tattoos and this messed up desire to flee to the

same region in Colorado? Not to mention unusual, even unique, physical abilities? And what about the fake ID's? Or the money? Or the fancy condos? You're not gonna tell me that's not a bad omen. And you're not gonna tell me it's all an innocent coincidence. Something's going on here and if you ask me—it's not good."

I swallowed uneasily while Jacinda looked ready to pass out. Di was scowling, but then something Jet said caught my attention.

"Wait. ID's? Money? *Condos?"*

"Right, that's something I wanted to ask you," Di said. "Didn't you wake up in a luxury condominium with money and identification?"

"Um, no, I pretty much woke up opposite to that."

She frowned. "We've been wondering how you were homeless. It doesn't make any sense when we woke up with money." She shook her head. "If you didn't wake up in a condominium, where *did* you wake up?"

"In an alleyway in Rapid City."

Di's eyes bulged. "In an alleyway, *outside*?"

"Yeah."

Perplexed expressions covered everyone's faces. "And you didn't have any cash or personal documents on you?" Di asked.

"No, nothing."

Di cocked her head. "I wonder why that is, since the rest of us all woke up in similar conditions. Except Flint. His was a little different."

Before I could ask what was different about Flint's, Di said, "That's bizarre that you woke up outside."

"So, the rest of you woke up in a condo? With money?" I felt strangely left out.

"Yes." Jacinda nodded. "We all woke up in furnished luxury penthouses or condos, with money, identification and cell phones on the kitchen counters."

"Of course, none of us knew how we got there or why we had those things," Di added, "but that's how we woke up, and even stranger, the properties *belonged* to us. The legal paperwork was also on the counter. The deeds were in our names."

"Why did you all have money but I didn't?" The feeling of being excluded grew.

"I don't know," Di said, "but we all had ten thousand in cash, a bank card with five million dollars in our accounts, a driver's license, a social

security card, a birth certificate and the paperwork for the condos we owned. It was all neatly arranged on our kitchen counters in our mysteriously owned homes."

I thought back to that morning when I'd woken by the dumpster in the alleyway. It would have been much less stressful if I'd had resources like that. "Jeez, that would have made life easier."

"But at least you were able to make your way here, without money. That's what matters," Jacinda said soothingly.

"I have some money." Granted, it was from people who gave it to me out of pity, insisting I take it, but it was still money. I paused as another thought struck me. "If you all have ID's then you do know your identity, right? You just don't remember it?"

Di eyed Flint. "No. I wish it was that easy, but all of our identification is fake. High quality fakes, but still fakes. Flint and I looked into it and found that the hospitals of our supposed births have no records of us, not to mention our Social Security numbers all belong to dead people."

My mouth dropped as I finally understood the enormity of what she was saying. "So, you're saying that something or someone set this all up?"

"It's the only way to explain it," Di said. "If we all woke with money, similar ID's and tattooed symbols, then we're obviously connected and someone knows about us. I doubt one of us did this. How could we?"

I was too shocked to move.

"See what I mean?" Jet said. "Bad omen."

I shivered.

Flint's side warmed beside me. "That's enough. I think we've explained what we need to right now. It's been a tough morning for Lena. She doesn't need to worry anymore."

"No." I shook off the bad feeling. "I want to know. Can I see the stuff you guys woke up with?"

Flint grunted in disapproval, but Di walked into her bedroom and returned with a large duffel bag. "Here." She handed it to me.

I unzipped it. My eyes widened when I saw the considerable amount of cash. "How much is in here?"

"Forty-eight thousand, eight hundred and four dollars. Plus or minus a few pennies," Flint replied. "We combined all of the money each of us had after we found one another."

“We call it the *pile*.” Mica grinned. “There’d be more if Jet and Jacinda hadn’t blown so much of theirs.”

Jet held his hands up. “Hey, what’s a brother supposed to do when he wakes up in Vegas?”

“Gambling and designer clothes are not a good way to spend our cash,” Di said sharply.

Jacinda sighed. “I did buy most of my things on my debit card.”

“Also not a good idea,” Di replied. “Bank transactions can be tracked.”

“Anyway, as I was trying to say . . .” Mica said loudly. “We also have almost thirty million in our bank accounts, minus what the Suburban cost and what Jacinda spent. And it grows by the day with all the interest!”

I pulled out a Ziplock bag that held the licenses and social security cards. Opening the bag, I thumbed through them. “Flint Smith.” I studied Flint’s license. The address was some rural route in Wyoming. “Di Johnson.” I flipped to hers. Her address was in Wichita, Kansas. “Jacinda Jones from Phoenix, Arizona.” I kept flipping. “Jasper Brown from Salt Lake City, Utah; Jet Davis from Las Vegas, Nevada; and Mica Wilson from El Paso, Texas.” I frowned.

“Are those the cities all of you woke up in?” I asked.

“Yep,” Mica replied.

I scanned the cards again. Each seemed to have a current picture along with fairly accurate height, weight and eye color. I studied all of the last names again. “Why do these last names seem familiar?”

“Because they’re in the top eight most common last names in the U.S.” Flint replied. “The other most common last names are Williams and Miller. My guess is your missing ID had one of those names. If you ever had an ID.”

I thumbed through the cards again. “There are birth dates on these!”

“Yes,” Di replied. “If those are correct, Flint’s the oldest at twenty-four, followed by me at twenty-three, then Jacinda and the twins—also twenty-three. Mica’s the youngest at twenty-one.”

“You’re all roughly the same age?”

“If those ages are correct, yes, we’re all within a few years of one another,” Di replied.

“So I’m probably around that age too? Maybe early twenties?”

“You look to be in your twenties,” Jasper said.

“Yep, no wrinkles yet,” Jet added.

I'm in my early twenties? Granted I didn't have proof, but most likely I was around the same age as everyone else. More than anything, I wished I knew why I'd woken outside and not in a condo. What I'd give to have documents like these! At least some identity semblance, even if it was fake, would be comforting.

"So this new girl is probably around our age too?" I asked.

"Most likely," Di replied.

I dug through the bag again. "Where are the cell phones?"

"We got rid of them," Di said. "Cell phones can be tracked. We didn't want to take the risk."

I gaped. "Right."

"See?" Jet said. "Can't be anything good."

I felt the blood drain from my face.

"Okay, we're done," Flint said. "This meeting's over. Everyone up."

The tone of his voice surprised me. It was almost protective sounding. His arm was still around me too, and I once again sensed that strange energy coming off him. It felt like heat mixed with power. I shook my head. *Weird*.

"Flint's right," Di said. "I think we've given Lena enough to think about."

Flint stood. His arm dropped from around me. "Jet, Jasper and Mica, I need you guys to stand up."

He moved away. Within seconds, the furniture sat back in its original location. I stared in stunned disbelief. It was as if a tornado ripped through the room. His movements were so fast he'd actually been a blur. I'd never in my life—well, in the few short months of my known existence—had *ever* seen someone move so fast.

"How'd you do that?" I asked.

Flint shrugged. A lock of chestnut hair fell across his forehead. My pulse quickened.

"I honestly don't know," he replied. "If I don't keep it in check, I'd probably move that fast all of the time. It hasn't been easy to adapt to."

"Huh," I managed.

"Well if we're all done here, I'm heading up to the house for lunch." Jet stretched and yawned loudly. "I'm starving."

The thought of food made my mouth water. "I'll join you." I eyed Flint and wondered what he'd do.

“Di?” Flint said. “You want to . . .” He didn’t finish his sentence. Instead, he nodded toward the door.

Di stood. “Yeah.”

Without another word, the two of them left. A rush of air entered the cabin when the door shut behind them.

I watched through the window as they took off down the driveway. They walked closely, their heads dipped toward one another. A brief swell of disappointment filled me. Flint hadn’t said goodbye or looked at me since rearranging the furniture. I tried to shrug that feeling off.

“I know you’re hungry . . .” Jacinda’s comment snapped me back to my surroundings. “But how about you come with me first. You can’t go up to the house wearing that.” Her nose wrinkled as she assessed my clothes.

“But I wore this last night,” I replied.

“We’re heading out,” Jet said. “You guys coming?”

Jacinda shook her head. “Lena and I will be up in a minute. You three go ahead.”

Mica, Jet and Jasper walked out the door. I watched them enviously. “Can’t we eat first?”

Jacinda eyed my pants. “This will just take a minute. Follow me.”

CHAPTER NINE

I reluctantly followed Jacinda down the hall. Her long blond hair swayed between her shoulder blades. My stomach protested the entire way.

"Don't worry," she called over her shoulder. "I know you're hungry."

We walked into her room. She nodded at a neatly made bed. "Have a seat."

I plopped down.

Jacinda grabbed a very large suitcase from the corner of the room. It was the one that took up so much space in the Suburban. She pulled the gold zipper. The metallic scratch sounded in the room. I eyed the material. It looked like genuine leather. She must have noticed me staring because she smiled.

"It's a Louis Vuitton. A gift from Huxley."

"Huxley?"

"The man I was with before I came here."

"You had a boyfriend?"

She shrugged. "I guess you could call him that. We kept each other company for a few weeks, until we arrived in Colorado."

I sat farther forward. "How'd you two meet?"

"At some hotel. We actually met the first night after I woke up. I wandered around my neighborhood that entire first day, trying to recognize something. Anything. When that didn't happen, I kept walking. I ended up at a hotel, went inside and sat at the bar in the lounge. Huxley came in a few minutes later. He approached and we got to talking, and the rest as they say, was history."

"So, did you drive up here with . . . what was his name . . . Huxley?"

Jacinda snorted delicately. "Drive? No, we flew in his Gulfstream IV."

"You flew in a *Gulfstream IV?"*

If I was right, that was a private jet that could seat close to twenty people. As soon as I thought that, my mouth fell open. *How do I know that?*

Once again, a random bit of knowledge popped into my head for no reason. It wasn't the first time it happened.

Initially, when I woke up, I thought everything in my memory was gone but then things slowly filtered through. Things I'd apparently once known.

I'd never forget the first time it happened, when I was walking down a street in Rapid City. I passed a used book store, and from the corner of an outside bin, I spotted a paperback of *Canterbury Tales*. As I continued on, it came to mind that Chaucer was considered the father of English literature. As for where that thought came from, I had no idea.

After that, more and more things materialized in my foggy brain. Such as the chemical composition of methane was CH4 or that Edvard Munch painted *The Scream*. Just random bits of information. It was incredibly disconcerting to say the least, and it just happened again. Apparently, I knew a thing or two about private jets.

"Jacinda, I know what a Gulfstream IV is. *How* do I know that?"

Jacinda took out a few clothes from her suitcase and examined them. "I don't know. We're all like that. We just know things. Isn't it weird when it happens? When you're talking to someone and some detail comes up and just like that." She snapped her fingers. "A hundred things appear in your brain and you know what they're talking about?"

"Yes!" I breathed.

Jacinda continued to rifle through her clothes. Every now and then, she pulled out a shirt, turned it back and forth and then refolded it back into her suitcase.

"So, where's Huxley now?" I asked.

"I don't know. I guess he went back to Phoenix. I broke up with him shortly after we landed." She held up another top. It was frilly and made of shiny material. "What about this one?"

I made a face. No doubt it would look great in a photo shoot, but it didn't seem useful for anything else.

"This will be a little big on you, but it should work."

"Um, it's nice but I think my T-shirt is better."

She eyed my shirt. I could tell from her expression that she didn't agree. She fumbled through her suitcase again and pulled out a long-sleeved shirt with splashes of color and some logo stitched on the bottom.

“How about this one?” She threw the shirt at me. “One hundred percent Peruvian cotton, eight hundred thread count.”

“Hmm.” I fingered the fabric.

“Well? What do you think?”

“This might work.”

I rubbed the incredibly soft cotton between my fingers. The smooth texture reminded me of plush silk. All of the clothes I owned came from Salvation Army. Most of them had holes and were ingrained with dirt.

“Try it on.”

“What if I get it dirty?”

Jacinda shrugged. “Then we’ll wash it.”

I stood and peeled my shirt off. Jacinda’s top fell below my waist, and the arms were too long, but the fabric felt good against my skin. It was soft, clean, and it didn’t smell.

“Thanks, Jacinda!” I grinned and pushed the sleeves up.

Jacinda stared at me, her mouth open. “You really have been starving, haven’t you?”

I felt my cheeks heat. I wondered how much of my skeletal frame she’d seen.

She gave me a sympathetic look. “You poor thing, but don’t worry, that’ll all change now. You’re not alone and homeless anymore. You don’t need to hitchhike or go hungry again.”

Her soft words and encouraging smile caused a warm feeling in me.

She appraised my lower half. “Now, what are we going to do about your pants . . .”

JACINDA AND I finally walked up to the main house half an hour later. I was ready to bang Jacinda’s suitcase over her head I was so hungry, but she insisted I be “presentable” before I left the cabin.

Consequently, my now clean hair was pulled up into a stylish ponytail. I also wore clean clothes from head to toe. We’d settled on a pair of jean shorts that practically fell off me since they were so big, but Jacinda decided it was the best she could do.

My shoes were another story. I wore a pair of her too-big slip-ons that kept falling off. I asked her why I couldn’t wear my worn sneakers. Her response had been to pick them up and throw them in the garbage.

Jacinda sighed heavily as I walked beside her. I could tell from her disapproving glances every time I hiked the shorts up or tripped over the too-big shoes that she didn't approve.

"We're going shopping after lunch," she said. "You need your own clothes."

"But I don't have any money." I held up a hand to shade my face in the bright sun. I could practically feel my pale skin burning.

She rolled her eyes. "Weren't you listening when we told you about us? Money isn't an issue."

"But it's not *mine*."

"Yes it is. You're one of us. Therefore, you're entitled to the *pile*."

I didn't bother arguing. We were almost to the porch, and scents from lunch drifted outside. I lifted my nose and let the scent lead the way.

When we entered the dining hall, music strummed through the speakers. Several tables in the dining area were occupied with other guests. The entire scene was quaint and pleasant. I spotted Mica, Jet and Jasper at a table in the corner. Mica smiled and waved us over.

Jet smirked when we approached. "You're looking as good as Jacinda."

My cheeks heated as I pulled up the shorts again. "Thanks."

"You've got to try this food. It's amazing!" Mica spooned a huge bite of some kind of berry pie and vanilla ice cream to her mouth.

I watched Mica eat. My mouth salivated.

Jet rolled his eyes. "Good one, Mica. Torment the starving girl."

Mica's brown eyes widened. "Sorry," she said through a mouthful of food. "Buffet's over there." She pointed to the corner. "Help yourself!"

I made a beeline for the buffet and almost cried in happiness when I saw the selection. A large stack of tortillas and taco shells, bowls of taco meat, cheddar cheese, diced tomatoes, lettuce and olives. Cups of sour cream, guacamole and salsa sat at the end. I piled four tacos on my plate. Jacinda only took one.

When we joined the others, Jasper raised an eyebrow at my heaping meal. "Looks like you've met your match, Mica."

I didn't care how much teasing the twins gave me. Similar to the previous night, all I saw was the food in front of me. When I finished, I slowly realized everyone was staring.

"What?" I asked.

“There’s sour cream all over your cheek,” Jacinda whispered.

A flush crept up my neck. I hastily wiped my mouth.

Mica grinned and dabbed some guacamole on Jasper’s nose. “Should I lick it off?” she asked.

Jasper grabbed a napkin but a smile tugged at his lips.

“Or I could?” Jet leaned over with his tongue out. Jasper smacked him.

Jacinda snorted delicately as I muffled a laugh.

“Mica will eat anything,” Jet said as Jasper cleaned his face. “Next time, leave the sour cream. She’ll probably scrape it off with a tortilla chip or two.”

Mica slugged him playfully in the shoulder. “Okay, who wants dessert? I’m thinking of having a second helping.”

“See what I mean?” Jet said dryly.

I smiled again and joined Mica at the dessert table.

THIRTY MINUTES LATER, I was so stuffed, movement seemed impossible. I groaned in pain. Jet and Jasper laughed while Jacinda clucked her tongue.

“Next time, slow down. Your body isn’t used to all of this food,” she said.

“You gonna be okay?” Mica asked as she polished off her second bowl of ice cream.

Jet clapped me on the back. “You’ll survive.” He turned to his brother. “I heard they’re having a trail ride for the guests this afternoon, and those ladies over there.” He nodded toward a group of four women seated at another table. “I overheard them say they’re going.”

Mica laughed. “Are you already over that girl you took on a few dates last week?”

Jet shrugged. “She left, remember? Her Colorado trip had come to an end. It’s time to move on.”

“Didn’t she cry when she kissed you goodbye?” Mica replied.

“She may have shed a few tears.” Jet smiled devilishly.

Mica laughed.

“So you want to go?” Jet asked Jasper.

Before Jasper could respond, Mica said, “I’ll go! And I promise not to interfere when you’re making your moves on the ladies.”

Jasper chuckled, his eyes twinkling when he glanced at Mica. “Jacinda? Lena? You want to come too?” he asked.

I was about to stand when Jacinda shook her head. “We’re going into town to buy Lena clothes. Has anyone seen Di or Flint? We’ll need a ride.”

“I haven’t seen them since the *grand revelation*,” Jet replied, making air quotes around the words. He eyed one of the four women when she stood. She was a cute blonde with curvy hips. “So are you two coming or not?” Jet asked. His eyes stayed on the blonde.

“No,” Jacinda said sweetly.

I sighed in exasperation. “Riding horses would be more fun than shopping.”

Jacinda merely raised an eyebrow and appraised my bare feet under the table. I hadn’t bothered trying to keep her shoes on while we ate.

“You can ride horses later,” she said gently yet firmly.

“All right.” Jet stood and then smiled when he and the blonde made eye contact.

“See you later,” Jasper called. Before I could argue, the three left. Mica’s excited chatter trailed through the dining hall.

I sighed in disappointment but knew Jacinda was right. I couldn’t go horseback riding in flats that kept falling off. “Okay, let’s get this shopping trip over with.”

She grinned. “Perfect. Now, we just need to find Di or Flint.”

Hearing Flint’s name made my stomach flip. “Why do we need to find them?”

“I don’t drive. Do you?”

For a moment, I just sat there. Could I drive? “Um, I have no idea.”

Jacinda pursed her lips. The glossy sheen from her lipstick—that amazingly didn’t seem to wear off despite eating—reminded me of raspberries. “We should find one of them. Just to be safe. Come on.”

My stomach felt like a jumbled mess when we stood. I wasn’t sure if that was from overeating or at the thought of seeing Flint again. Regardless, I followed Jacinda as we left the main house. On the gravel drive, I kept tripping and almost fell because of the blasted shoes.

I finally gave up. Pulling the flats off, I ambled down the drive in bare feet. Jacinda clucked in disapproval, but I didn’t care. Even though the gravel hurt my soles, I was still ready to throw the damned shoes in the pasture.

IT WASN’T HARD to find Di and Flint. Both were in our cabin. They jumped up from the couch when we walked through the door, as if we’d caught them doing something. My stomach sank as a new thought occurred to me. Were Di and Flint *together*?

I didn’t get a chance to think about it since Di asked what our plans were. Jacinda gave a pointed look at my bare feet. Di merely assessed my dirty toes with a heavy sigh, while Flint’s lips twitched up in a smile. It vanished when he caught me watching him.

“She needs clothes,” Jacinda said. “Can one of you drive us to Little Raven?”

Flint stepped forward. “I’ll take you.”

Jacinda smiled sweetly. “I’ll get my purse.”

Without Jacinda in the room, silence fell. Being so near Flint did funny things to my heart rate. He didn’t seem to notice. Instead, he and Di were doing that subtle communication again. Di raised an eyebrow, and Flint nodded slightly at which she made a motion toward her wrist. I had no idea what we’d walked in on, but I felt acutely aware of it in that moment.

I tried to ignore them. Fresh scents of eucalyptus subtly tinged the air. A dried wreath hung on the wall. I concentrated on that. It smelled nice. Unfortunately, the scent did little to distract me. Flint’s towering presence and dark eyes continually pulled at me.

I shuffled my feet and stuffed my hands in my pockets. That was a mistake. The shorts practically fell off. Luckily, I caught them before they fell to my knees.

“Ready?” Jacinda reappeared with a fresh sheen of lip gloss on her lips, and a pink purse clutched in her hand. A metallic Prada label gleamed.

I nodded eagerly. “Yes!”

She grinned, obviously mistaking my enthusiasm for the shopping trip versus wanting to flee the uncomfortable environment.

“Let’s go,” Flint said.

The sound of his deep voice made me jump. *Calm down, Lena!* It wasn’t good to pine for a guy that was already taken.

Or were he and Di *not* together?

I briefly pictured Flint’s arm around me that morning when the group revealed who they were. Di hadn’t seemed to care that Flint sat so close to me. Although, that didn’t necessarily mean anything. Flint’s intentions could have been to help me mesh with the group. Or maybe he’d been

afraid I'd bolt or pass out. He simply could have had his arm around me to stop me from fleeing. I could be reading into something that wasn't even there.

I sighed. I was putting way too much thought into this.

"Lena?" Jacinda called. She and Flint were standing by the door.

"Oh, sorry," I mumbled.

Flint didn't say anything as we left the cabin. He also wouldn't meet my gaze. Once again, his face was completely unreadable. Di, on the other hand, called out to not spend too much money. Jacinda just waved and acted like she didn't hear her.

Our car doors slammed in the quiet afternoon. Flint sat in the driver's seat, Jacinda took the passenger side so I hopped in the back. Sitting right behind Flint offered a very nice view of his beautiful hair and broad shoulders. They were so broad they extended past the seat. A pool of heat filled my core. I squirmed uncomfortably as Flint started the engine. *What the hell is the matter with me?*

Before long, we were in the forest driving toward Little Raven. A breeze trailed through Flint's open window, carrying scents of pine. My thoughts drifted to everything I'd learned that morning. Was it really only that morning?

I rubbed my tattoo. The perfect circle divided into four. Since the silence was killing me, I said the first thing that came to mind. "What do you think our tattoos are symbols of?"

Flint's dark eyes drifted to the rearview mirror. "Di and I have a few ideas."

Jacinda clasped her hands tightly together. "How many shirts do you think you'll need?" she asked. She flashed me her supermodel smile.

Shirts? "Oh, um. I don't know. Three or four?"

"That's it?" she replied.

I leaned forward so I could better meet Flint's gaze in the mirror. "What do you think the symbols are of?"

"I really don't think three or four is enough," Jacinda cut in. "I was thinking you need at least a week's worth at the very minimum. You'll also need hiking boots, if you want to join in the activities. Not to mention jeans, shorts, shoes . . ." Her list grew.

I leaned back in my seat. Jacinda's nervous energy bubbled around her. I gave Flint a questioning glance. He subtly shook his head in the rearview

mirror. I took the hint. Jacinda obviously didn't want to discuss our situation. I remembered what Jet said. How all of this was a bad omen. But still, didn't we need to talk about it? Burying our heads in the sand, pretending like we were normal people, wouldn't help us.

When we got to town, Jacinda gracefully extracted herself from the Suburban.

"Come on, Lena." Her energy had returned to its usual subdued state. I hadn't mentioned our tattoos again.

Flint and I stepped out of the Suburban. We stood beside one another on the sidewalk. He towered over me. In jeans and a T-shirt, he looked incredibly sexy. I tried not to notice.

"I'm going to the public library to use the computers," he said to Jacinda.

A swell of disappointment strummed through me. "You're not coming with us?"

He shook his head without meeting my gaze. "Pete and Val don't have Wi-Fi. Besides, public computers are safer when we're doing internet searches."

"Searches for what?"

"I want to research a few things, now that we know where you woke up. I'll be back in two hours." He still wouldn't meet my gaze.

"Let's get going, Lena." Jacinda clasped my hand.

"Right, um, okay," I replied.

Flint turned. With the sun glinting off the natural highlights in his hair, and the way his shirt hugged his broad shoulders, I never wanted to look away. However, I wasn't the only one admiring the view. He passed a group of young women sitting at an outside café table. All four watched him. The sound of giggles and whispered comments followed.

Jealousy raced hotly through my blood. Its intensity surprised me. Feeling my cheeks flush crimson, I did my best to keep my breathing even.

"Everything all right?" Jacinda asked.

A breeze ruffled her long, blond hair. A knowing twinkle glinted in her light-brown eyes. I ducked my head and brushed past her into the store. Seriously, I needed to stop making a fool of myself.

THE NEXT TWO hours were entirely painful. I kept thinking about Jet, Jasper and Mica on a trail ride. They were currently enjoying the

outdoors, whereas I was stuck trying on piece after piece of clothing. Jacinda dragged me from store to store. The pile of bags grew in our wakes.

It didn't help that some of the shopkeepers recognized me. I'd asked a few of them that morning if they knew about a missing girl matching my appearance. Every time I got recognized, a wary look would flash across their faces. Luckily, Jacinda did most of the talking and all of the explaining.

"She was looking for us." Jacinda handed a male shopkeeper several hundred dollar bills as he rang up our latest purchase. He'd visibly flinched when I'd walked in. "Silly thing, she was so tired," Jacinda continued. "That's probably why she was saying that stuff."

She gave me a sympathetic smile and winked.

The store owner just stared at Jacinda. I swear he was about to drool. "That's good to hear. My wife . . . um, I mean . . . my shop assistant was worried about her."

Jacinda looked at him demurely through her full lashes. "Please let your *shop assistant* know that she's just fine."

The man smiled and almost tripped when he came around the counter to hand us our bags. "You ladies have a nice afternoon. I hope to see you in here again." His eyes stayed on Jacinda.

I almost threw up in my mouth but neither seemed to notice. "Are we done?" I asked.

Jacinda gave the man her supermodel smile. He almost knocked over a rack of sunglasses when he turned. I smothered a gag and followed her out of the store.

Once on the sidewalk, I glanced at Jacinda's watch. We still had thirty minutes until Flint returned. I spotted an ice cream shop on the corner. "Do you want to get some ice cream while we wait for Flint?"

Jacinda's expression told me exactly what she thought of that. "There's a shoe store down on that side. Follow me."

I rolled my eyes and followed her once again. It was hard not to smile, though. There was a bounce in Jacinda's step. I had a feeling this was the most fun she'd had in a while.

When Flint finally returned, we had over ten shopping bags full of items. In my opinion, I didn't need over half of them. Jacinda, of course, didn't agree.

Flint eyed the mountain of items. "How much did you spend?"

Jacinda merely put the bags in the back of the Suburban. “Not much.”

“Jacinda . . .” he said, his voice deepening.

“Only two thousand. Really, it’s not a big deal.” Worry flashed through her eyes before she smiled brightly. Flint, however, seemed immune to her charms.

He raked a hand harshly through his hair. “Have fun explaining that one to Di. You know we need to conserve the *pile*. What if it takes months or years to find answers? We’re dependent on that money.”

Jacinda stuffed the rest of the bags in the back. She hurried to her door. It wasn’t lost on me that she never replied.

“Did you find anything at the library?” I asked.

Flint gave another angered glance toward Jacinda’s door. “Not really.”

I stepped back as a slow wave of power hit me. Once again, that feeling radiated from him. I crossed my arms. “Um . . . what were you looking for?”

“A connection between our cities, or some kind of connection between us and our cities.” Again, he wouldn’t meet my gaze.

I wanted to ask more but got the impression this wasn’t a good time. Flint was angry. That was apparent.

“Should we head back?” I asked.

He nodded curtly and got in the vehicle. I buckled myself in the back again as he started the engine. We peeled out of the parking spot. A few people stared at the shiny, expensive Suburban. I’m sure the two front occupants were partly to blame. Flint and Jacinda were as good looking as any Hollywood A-list couple.

Jacinda smiled as we drove into the forest. “Lena and I had fun. Didn’t we?”

I made a noncommittal noise and muttered something about the experience being akin to dying slowly.

“What was that?”

I knew from her annoyed expression she’d heard me. *Of course* she’d heard me. She could have heard me a mile away. I smiled brightly and berated myself for forgetting her ability. “Nothing. Yes, it was very fun. The time of my life.”

Flint’s lips quirked up in the rearview mirror.

“Well anywho,” Jacinda said. “We’ll probably need to go back into town tomorrow or the next day. I’m running short on my favorite nail

polish. Since we didn’t have time to pick it up . . .”

I stopped listening as Jacinda rattled off the other things we ‘needed.’ Instead, I watched Flint’s forearms as he gripped the steering wheel. They were well muscled with thick rope veins. That strange feeling of safety washed through me again. I just hoped it wasn’t a false security. Jet’s words still haunted me. *A bad omen*. I shivered.

CHAPTER TEN

We quickly fell into a routine on the ranch. Since Flint had paid for our cabins through the week, we didn't need to leave anytime soon.

Each day started with having breakfast at the main house. From there, Di and Flint would disappear. I had no idea where they went. We usually wouldn't see them again until evening, and since Di wasn't a talker and Flint seemed intent on ignoring me, I had no idea what they spent their time doing. Consequently, I spent most days with Jacinda, Mica and the twins.

It was fun yet frustrating. Four *days* had passed yet we still knew nothing about our situation.

I sighed heavily and took a drink of orange juice. We were currently eating breakfast. Di and Flint had already left. Country music strummed through the speakers. Guests chatted and silverware clanked. Everything about our stay had been nothing but pleasant. Yet all I could think about was how this felt like some bizarre vacation that was completely avoiding the reality of our lives. We still had *no* answers.

"What do Di and Flint do all day?" I asked Mica.

She took a huge bite of pancakes. Syrup practically drowned them. "I dunno for sure, but I do know they spend a lot of time talking about what happened to us and why."

"But why aren't *all* of us talking about it?"

She shrugged. "Hey, you wanna go on a nature walk? They're having one this morning."

"Um, sure, but why don't we all talk with Di and Flint? Wouldn't it be smarter to have us brainstorming together?"

Mica took another huge bite. "I dunno."

She turned her attention to Jasper and laughed at something he said. Meanwhile, Jet sat with the curvy blonde and her friends at their table. The twin's arm was draped across the blonde's shoulders, his thumb making circles on her upper arm. She inched closer to him.

I sighed in frustration. Over the past four days, I'd also learned that Jacinda wasn't the only one who wanted to avoid our circumstance. Mica seemed completely oblivious to the fact that our lives started four months ago. The twins seemed more open to talking about our situation. However, Jet acted more interested in hooking up with other guests. I didn't mind, though. Each time I'd approached our situation with Jet, he started murmuring about aliens and kryptonite.

I understood why Di and Flint ignored him.

"What about you?" I asked Jacinda. "Do you know why we don't all discuss it?"

The blond beauty's hand stilled as she brought her napkin to her lips. Her face paled. She gently dabbed at the corner of her mouth. "I'm going to get another cup of coffee. Would you like one?"

She stood before I could respond.

I finished my breakfast as Jasper and Mica got into a discussion about Sriracha sauce—to put on eggs, or to not put on eggs? That was the question. My attention drifted to the window. Were Di and Flint currently discussing our memory loss? Perhaps searching the area for answers? I pushed my chair back.

"I'm gonna pass on the nature walk, Mica. I'll see you all later." I bolted before she replied.

I RETURNED TO the cabin. First ours, then the guys. Neither Di nor Flint waited in either. Scents of coffee lingered in our cabin, though. In other words, they *had* been there. Nobody had made coffee that morning before we walked up for breakfast. I had probably just missed them.

Back outside, I jogged down the porch steps and plopped my hands on my hips. A breeze fluttered my hair around my shoulders.

Where would they go?

Mica had said there was a nature walk today, and there were always trail rides. However, I'd never seen Di or Flint partake in any group activities. In fact, I'd never seen them on the ranch during the day. Not even at lunchtime.

The sound of a car engine starting broke the quiet. My eyes widened. I sprinted to where the Suburban was parked. White tail lights were alight as I careened to a stop at the bumper. I hurriedly knocked on the back window. Red tail lights flashed.

Without bothering to ask if they minded, I opened the back door and jumped inside. Flint's dark eyes met mine the second I did. He sat at the driver's seat, Di on the passenger side. She whipped around just as I clicked my seat belt in place.

"Mind if I join you guys today?" I asked.

They glanced at one another. An unreadable expression covered Flint's face. My heart quickened at the sight. He looked devilishly handsome, even more so this morning. His hair was still damp from his shower, and his unique scent drifted toward me. That bizarre feeling of safety once again cloaked me. I almost sighed in contentment. Just being around him made me happier.

Di finally shrugged. "Three heads together is better than two. Let's get going." She reached for her coffee. Two steaming mugs sat in the console. "Just no talking about aliens and superman. Got it?"

"No aliens and no super heroes," I replied. "My lips are sealed."

Flint's hands merely tightened around the steering wheel. He didn't say a word.

I couldn't tell if he was unhappy about me joining them or not. I clasped my hands tightly together. His eyes wouldn't meet mine when he looked over his shoulder to reverse.

The drive on the county road wasn't any better. Neither Di nor Flint said a thing. It was very different from hanging out with Jacinda, Mica and the twins. Gone were the joking quips and easy laughter. I felt acutely aware of my presence with these two.

"Where are we going?" I finally asked. We were driving through the forest. Pine trees and aspens flashed by my window.

"Little Raven," Flint replied. "To the public library."

"To use the computers again?"

"Yes."

"What are you trying to find?"

"Today we're going to—"

"Ah!" Di exclaimed. She grabbed her head and leaned forward. Flint slowed the vehicle and pulled to the side of the road. The Suburban stopped abruptly when he threw it into park.

"Di?" Flint reached over and put a hand on her back. My eyes glued to his large palm resting near her shoulder. My stomach plummeted. *Yep, they're definitely together.*

I shook off the intense pain that realization brought. Di was currently holding her head between her hands, and all I could think about was how Flint touching her ripped a hole in my heart.

“What do you see?” Flint’s words were soft and gentle.

“A city,” she said. “It’s . . . there are skyscrapers and a body of water . . . maybe an ocean. No . . .” She shook her head. Her fingers wrapped so tightly around her skull they dug into her hair. “Not an ocean. A lake? No, that can’t be right. It’s a huge body of water.”

“Maybe the Great Lakes?” Flint asked.

“Maybe,” she panted.

My eyes widened as it dawned on me what was happening. Di was in the midst of a vision. She leaned forward, slightly rocking as she gripped her head. I wanted to ask questions, but I didn’t want to interrupt whatever was happening. From how they acted, I guessed this wasn’t the first vision Di had experienced in Flint’s presence.

“Try to make out a detail,” he coaxed. “Can you see something on a building that stands out? Or a pier in the water? Something we can identify?”

“There’s a park. I see lots of grass and people walking and—” Her breath whooshed out of her. She sat up abruptly. “It’s gone.”

She still held her head. Flint rubbed her shoulder. “Did you see anything on a building? Any glimpse of a street sign?”

She shook her head. “No.”

“Concentrate. Try to remember.”

“There was . . . um . . . one of the buildings was black. It was the tallest one.”

“Good. What else can you remember about it?”

“The black building was by the water. Kind of.”

“Anything else?” Flint asked gently.

She was silent for a moment and eventually shook her head. “No. That’s it.”

“We’ll see what we can find based off that. Thirsty?”

“Very.”

He reached into the back. His gaze again wouldn’t meet mine. Heat raced up my neck as he fished a water bottle from under the seat. When he turned back around, he unscrewed the cap and held the bottle to Di. She took it with shaky fingers and drank greedily.

I swallowed uneasily.

An air of intimacy hung in the cab. I'd never seen Di so shaken or Flint so attentive. Regret pulsed through me. I shouldn't have come. This was too intimate, too intense. I was forcing myself on them and it was obvious they were sharing something that wasn't meant to be witnessed by others.

"Are you okay?" Flint asked.

Di nodded. "Let's go."

He put the Suburban back in drive. With a spin of tires, we once again sped down the gravel road. None of us said anything for the rest of the drive. When we pulled up to the public library and parked in the small lot, Flint turned.

His gaze softened for the merest second when our eyes met. "We'll spend most of the day here."

I nodded mutely.

The three of us climbed out of the vehicle. Di stood straight, her head held high. If I hadn't witnessed her vision, I'd have never guessed any bone of vulnerability lay inside her.

"We'll search cities today," she said. "Specifically cities by the Great Lakes with parks by the waterfront. Let's get a move on."

She strode forward. The stoic, resolute Di I was slowly coming to know was back.

WE SPENT THE morning on the computers. One of the librarians smiled at Flint and Di when she passed us. Neither of them smiled back. I wondered if Di or Flint had considered the staff here may begin to recognize them. It was my understanding neither Di or Flint wanted to draw attention to us.

Flint leaned closer to Di just as the woman passed. "We may need to start scoping out the internet cafes," he murmured.

"I was just thinking the same thing," she said.

I almost rolled my eyes. Of course they'd considered it.

Di sat in the middle of us. Her fingers flew across the keyboard as images from her Google searches came up. I was glad for the distance from Flint. I tried to concentrate on what I was supposed to be doing—searching for cities that matched Di's vision—but it was hard. My body was so in tune with Flint's. Every time he took a deep breath or hunched forward, I perked

up. Or whenever he leaned back to stretch, I couldn't help but glance in his direction to admire his strong forearms and rounded shoulders.

Each time he moved, my body betrayed me. I berated myself internally. He and Di were together. So what that he'd put his arm around me four days ago when the group revealed who they were? For the past four days, he'd ignored me. In other words, that comforting arm had obviously been a tactic he used to help new members mesh into the group. I swallowed the lump in my throat. It was crazy how much that realization stung.

Don't think about him, Lena.

I made myself type in a new search and forced myself to ignore the pain ripping through my chest.

THE REST OF the day passed in a blur. We found a few cities that matched the description from Di's visions and narrowed it down to three: Chicago, Cleveland and Buffalo. Chicago seemed the most likely since its black skyscraper, the John Hancock building, was the tallest.

"Does that mean we'll go to Chicago?" I pulled open the door to the Suburban as we all climbed in. It was almost six in the evening. Supper was served at 6:30 at the ranch. We'd probably make it back just in time.

"Not necessarily." Di clicked her seat belt in place. "We need to stay here regardless until the new girl arrives, and we won't leave until I'm positive that Chicago is in our future."

"You mean it could be a fluke?"

"I can't say for sure. So far, my visions haven't been wrong, but we're not about to travel across the country until I'm sure it's right."

Flint started the engine. I tried not to let it bother me that Flint hadn't said a word to me since lunch. More than ever, I felt like a third wheel.

I *had* caught him watching me a few times throughout the day, though, that unreadable expression on his face. However, each time our eyes had met, he'd hastily looked away as if embarrassed that I'd caught him. Those awkward moments wreaked havoc on my nerves. All day my body strummed in awareness for him, and all day, he'd only spoken to me when necessary.

"Thanks for your help today, Lena," Di said as we drove up the ranch's driveway. "It was nice to have another set of eyes."

"Um, sure," I replied.

It wasn’t lost on me that Flint didn’t voice his agreement.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

That evening Flint retreated to his cabin even though Jet and Jasper joined us for a movie in ours. It was another thing I'd noticed over the past four days. Flint rarely joined the group when we hung out in the evenings.

The next morning, Di, Jacinda, Mica and I all walked up to the main house for breakfast. Our feet shuffled quietly on the gravel as a mourning dove crooned in the distance.

"What a beautiful morning," Jacinda murmured.

"Hmm," was all Di replied.

Normally, Di joined Flint first thing, but since he wasn't waiting on his porch for her, she'd continued on with us. I couldn't help but think the reason for Flint's absence was because of me. Maybe he didn't want me joining them again today. Maybe, he'd whisk Di away when I wasn't looking. I bit my lip as the main house came into view.

When we entered the dining room, soft country music floated in the air. The thought of a big breakfast had my spirits rising. I still felt perpetually hungry, even though I'd probably gained a few pounds. All thoughts of food vanished, though, when I caught a glimpse of Val.

I immediately knew something was wrong.

Pete's wife stood in the kitchen wringing her hands in between frantic movements to the stove, oven and dining room. The room was also suspiciously empty. Not a guest to be seen.

"Where is everyone?" Mica asked.

Jacinda put her hands on her hips. "Good question."

Since nobody was in the dining room, I wondered if we were early. The clock on the wall read just after eight. We weren't that early.

"Oh!" Val stood in the entryway to the kitchen, her eyes wide. "You're here!"

"Is everything okay?" I asked.

"Yes!" Val turned and hurried back to the counter. She picked up a bowl and beat something furiously. "Everything's fine, nothing to worry

about! Just give me a little more time!”

“No, everything’s not fine,” Pete said. I almost jumped when he appeared behind us.

Di’s gaze narrowed. “Why? What happened?”

Pete sighed. “It seems Sheena and Mary Beth ran off with two of the cowboys.”

“Sheena and Mary Beth?” I said.

“The two girls that helped Val in the kitchen,” Pete explained. I vaguely recalled the plump blonde and skinny brunette that often frequented the dining hall.

Di crossed her arms. “They didn’t give you any notice?”

Pete shook his head. “No. They took off in the middle of the night. Val found a note from the girls. One of our guys, Tyler, found a note from the cowboys. They’ve all cleaned out, gone to Vegas. Something about getting married.” Pete shook his head. “I doubt they’ll be back.”

“That sucks,” Mica commented. “Does that mean no breakfast today?”

Before Pete could respond, Jacinda said, “Is there anything we can do to help?”

Val stopped her frantic beating. A rosy hue filled her cheeks, and her eyes glowed with fatigue. “Don’t be silly. You’re our guests here.”

“It’ll go much faster if you let us help,” I said.

“Yeah,” Jacinda added. “We’re not busy.”

A shrewd expression covered Di’s face. After a moment, she said, “We’d be happy to help.”

Her admission surprised me. I figured she and Flint would disappear regardless of what the rest of us did.

“Oh, you couldn’t possibly want to spend your time doing this!” Val cried.

Pete walked to Val and put a hand on her shoulder. “*The Lord works in mysterious ways.”* He said it so quietly, I almost didn’t hear him.

Val’s gaze softened. Her shoulders relaxed. “Okay, thank you.” She nodded toward a mountain of fruit. “You can help cut that up.”

After getting situated, we formed a line along the counter. I had the oranges, Mica had the pineapple, Di, the strawberries, and Jacinda, the melons. I glanced at Di curiously as we cut up the fruit. Her movements were quick and methodical. She seemed to be thinking about something from the concentrated expression on her face.

A few minutes later, she wiped her hands on a towel. “I’ll be right back.”

“Where are you going?” I asked.

“To talk to the guys. If two cowboys also quit, Pete may need their help.” She was about to turn when I grabbed her arm. Her muscles tensed and her gaze drifted to my hand. I hastily let go.

“You’re going to ask the guys to help too?”

Di’s gaze shifted to Val before she turned back to me. In a quiet voice, she said, “If they’ve had workers quit, they may need to hire more help. The new girl’s not coming for at least another week, possibly two or even three. We need to stay in this area until then and the more we conserve the *pile*, the better. An income would help.”

“You mean you’re hoping they’ll *hire* us?”

“Keep your voice down!” she hissed. Mica glanced over her shoulder but went back to cutting the pineapple. Jacinda, meanwhile, pretended as if she hadn’t heard a thing, even though that was impossible.

“Maybe,” Di said. “I need to run it by Flint to see if he agrees.”

She strode out the kitchen’s screen door before I could ask anything else. It banged loudly behind her.

With Di gone, Jacinda and I took over the strawberries since Mica seemed to have her hands full with the pineapple. Mica winced when one of the thorns pricked her finger.

“Damn fruit.” She cut into another piece, again with too much force, and grimaced when another thorn stuck her.

“You want to trade?” I asked.

“Thought you’d never ask.” She dumped the remaining fruit in front of me.

As I cut carefully through the rough skin, my thoughts drifted to what Di said. She was going to try to wheedle us into jobs on the ranch if Flint agreed.

Flint’s image popped into my head. Those dark eyes, his tanned face and perfect lips. I almost dropped my knife. *Perfect lips? Really, Lena? The guy’s got a girlfriend!*

“It’s crazy that Val’s workers quit,” Mica stated.

“What?” My knife almost slipped.

“I’d never give up a job on this ranch.” Mica sighed. “Well, if I worked with the horses. I’m not much for cooking, but working outside

would be great.” Mica’s chatter soon helped distract me. She talked about rounding up cattle, taking the guests on trail rides and lassoing calves. I smiled at some of her ramblings.

Di returned a while later, stating the guys had gone in search of Pete to offer what help they could. She didn’t fill me in on what she and Flint decided, and I didn’t ask. It was becoming obvious that putting distance between myself, Di and Flint was probably best. Even though I wanted answers at any cost, my heart still ached knowing that Flint was taken. Perhaps a little distance would cool my feelings.

Mica, however, grumbled enviously. “Couldn’t I join them instead of doing this?”

“If Val needs help here, than that’s where we’ll help,” Di said sternly.

Mica rolled her eyes.

About an hour later, the kitchen returned to normal. With Val’s direction, we finished preparing the food and arranged the buffet table. With all of us working, we soon had a mountain of food prepared.

“We did it!” Val said, as she topped off the coffee.

“Of course, we did it.” Mica put her hands on her hips. “Now, we just need people to eat it.”

“When are the guests coming up?” I asked.

Val wrung her hands in her apron. “I don’t know. Pete went to their cabins first thing this morning to tell them breakfast was delayed. He must have forgotten about all of you.” She gave us an apologetic smile. “I was so flustered. I told him to have them stay put until I finished. I guess they’re still waiting in their cabins.”

“They must be hungry,” Jacinda commented.

Val nodded. “I’m sure they’re all ravenous. Not to mention, the activities have been held up because of this.”

“They can all come up now, right?” I said. “We could get them for you, couldn’t we?”

“Sure!” Mica replied. “We’ll get ‘em.” She tromped out the door before Val could respond. Dirt flaked off her boots, and the door banged loudly behind her.

“Oh . . .” Val paused. She eyed the dirt and reached for the broom in the corner. “If you don’t mind. I’ve got a bad knee and walking up and down the gravel drive flares it up.”

“We don’t mind,” Jacinda replied.

“Be back before you know it,” I added.

Val gripped the broom tighter. “Well, I still need someone to carry a few things out.”

“I’ll stay,” Di said. “Just tell me what to do.”

Val let out a sigh. “Bless your souls.”

Outside, Jacinda and I caught up with Mica. The three of us walked to the cabins.

In the daylight, the ranch stretched as far as I could see. Pastures and fields traveled for miles. The main house sat at the highest point and overlooked the valley that dipped down in front of it, although a barn off to the west sat a little bit higher.

Twenty minutes later, we had all of the guests in the dining hall. To say that Val was over the moon would be an understatement. She also practically kissed us when we offered to refill the buffet as things ran out. Di, of course, had been the one to insist we help. Val seemed completely oblivious to every calculating move Di made.

When the guests finished, Val dished us all large plates of food. The four of us sat in the empty dining room while Val washed a mountain of pots in the kitchen. Banging from the pots echoed into the hall. Jacinda nibbled a piece of fruit. Di merely watched Val, taking bites of toast every now and then. That gleam was back in Di’s eyes.

Turning toward us, Di set her toast down. “New plan. We’re going to try to get jobs on this ranch.”

Jacinda set her fruit down and wiped her hands. “Jobs doing what?”

“This.” Di held up her plate of food. “If Val and Pete are willing to hire us, it’ll not only give us a steady income so we don’t have to use the *pile*, but it’ll also give us an excuse to stay in this area while we wait for the new girl.”

“Does that mean we’ll be cooking *every day*?” Mica complained.

“If they hire us, yes,” Di said.

Mica groaned dramatically. Jacinda patted her on the back.

Di stood and approached Val. They fell into conversation. I watched through the open area into the kitchen. From Val’s shaking head and fluttering hands, I guessed she was saying no, but then Di said something else, and after a few more exchanges, Val smiled again and seemed contrite.

Di sauntered back. “Get your cleaning gloves ready ladies. Looks like we’ll be cabin cleaning all morning.”

“Cleaning?” Mica stated. “Seriously? Can’t I go with the guys?”

Di crossed her arms. “That would be up to Val. I told her we could all help until they found new staff.”

Mica’s eyes brightened. She raced to the older woman. After a few quick exchanges, Mica squealed in delight and disappeared out the screen door.

I cocked my head. “Until they find new staff? But I thought we were trying to get their jobs?”

A glint shone in Di’s eyes. “All in good time.”

I had no idea what that meant, but I did know one thing, Di had a plan and the only person who knew about it was Flint.

CHAPTER TWELVE

We spent the morning cleaning. Apparently, the normal staff routine consisted of breakfast prep, followed by cabin cleaning, then lunch prep and serving. Following that, it was lunch cleanup and supper prep.

After Val wrapped the pans of lasagna we'd made for the supper meal, she put them in the fridge. A rosy hue still filled her cheeks, but her frantic movements had calmed. "I can't thank you all enough. Now, you girls go enjoy your afternoon. There's archery down by the pond this afternoon. Perhaps you'd like to try that?"

"What time should we be back?" Di asked.

Val wiped down the last counter. "Oh no, you've done enough."

Di crossed her arms. "I thought we talked about this. We're happy to help until you find more staff."

Val wrung the washcloth out a bit longer than necessary. "But I hate to ask that of you. This is your vacation."

Di smiled. The expression looked entirely out of place on her face, but my guess was that Di found the description of this being our *vacation* as amusing as I did. Since when was trying to find your identity and forgotten memories a vacation? Of course, Val didn't know about that.

"We're really just aimlessly traveling right now. No plans. Just tell us when to be back," Di said.

"Well, if you don't mind, are you able to come back at six?" Val folded the washcloth neatly on the counter. "I really hate to ask it of you, but if you're willing . . ." She wrung her hands again.

"We'll be back then," Di said.

Val nodded contritely. "Bless you, girls."

The three of us left and ambled back to the cabin. I glanced at Di's watch on her swinging wrist. Two in the afternoon so four whole hours to kill.

"Won't us getting jobs cut into your and Flint's research time?" I asked. The sun shone down as our feet crunched into the gravel.

Di eyed me coolly. “Yes and no. If you hadn’t noticed, only four of their staff quit, yet there are seven of us. That means we won’t be working full time.”

I bit my lip as I realized she’d already worked out all of the details. “In other words, you’ll still have time to search for answers even if four of us are on the clock every day.”

“Exactly.”

“Is that what you’re going to do now?” I asked as our porch came into view. “Are you going back into town for the afternoon?”

Di shook her head. “Not today. I’m going to try to see her again.”

With that, she climbed the steps to the cabin and retreated inside, probably to her bedroom. If Di’s visions were always like what I’d witnessed yesterday, I wouldn’t be surprised if she preferred having them in private.

“What about you?” I asked Jacinda. “What are you going to do?”

The panicked expression that coated her face—the expression that always seemed to appear when our situation was mentioned—slowly disappeared.

“How about a manicure?” She picked up my hand. The panicked look was replaced with a horrified one when she got a look at my nails.

I glanced at the upper barn. It was one of the few places I hadn’t explored. I pulled my hand back. “I was thinking about going up there.” I nodded toward it.

“Why?” The horrified expression remained.

I shrugged. “Want to join me?”

“No thanks.”

“Okay, see you later.”

I took off toward the upper barn before Jacinda could insist my nails came first. Ever since noticing the barn, I’d been curious what lay behind it.

I struggled up the large hill, cursing the thin air. I still wasn’t used to the altitude. Huffing, I reached the top.

I gasped. The view around the main house had not prepared me for what resided beyond the ranch. Distant mountains gleaming with snow shone on the horizon. Rolling, forested hills stretched for miles. An abundance of wildflowers littered the pasture’s perimeters and appeared as pretty as a postcard.

“It’s Lena, isn’t it?”

I jumped at the sound of his voice. One of the cowboys stood at the entrance to the barn. He dusted his hands off on a leather apron that covered dirty jeans. Sunlight gleamed off his faded cowboy hat.

I cocked my head, my heart still hammering. “Do I know you?”

He shook his head, smiling. “No. Mica told us your names when she started helping this morning. She said the redhead was Lena. I’m guessing that’s you?”

“Oh, right.” I realized I’d seen him before in the dining hall. He’d never helped in the group activities, though.

“You lookin’ for someone?” he asked when I didn’t say anything.

“No. Just looking around.”

“I hear your helpin’ Val in the kitchen?”

“Yeah, until she can find more help. I don’t have to be back till six so thought I’d take a walk.”

The cowboy stepped closer, and I was able to see him in more detail. He had hazel eyes. Dark blond hair peeked out from under his cowboy hat. His face was angular but had soft contours. I guessed he was young, probably in his early twenties and those soft lines would harden with age. He grinned and held out his hand.

“I’m Dean Stewart. It’s nice to meet you.”

I returned the smile and shook his hand. Something about Dean pulled at me. He seemed so genuine and friendly. I switched my vision. When a white cloud appeared, I wasn’t surprised.

“So what are you doing in there?” I snapped my sight back to normal.

“Just shoddin’ one of the mares. You can watch if you want. Pete has me do all the horses.”

We walked into the barn. Scents of hay and horse hung in the air. I blinked at the light adjustment. A golden-colored mare waited in the cross ties. She peeked over her shoulder when she heard our voices and nickered when Dean got closer.

“Hey, Giselda.” He bent down and lifted a front hoof. Alongside the mare, a number of metal tools sat on a stool.

“Is this your horse?” I asked.

“No.” Dean smiled again. “My horse is in the pasture out back. The big gray gelding with the black mane. I’ve had ‘im since I was a teenager. He’s a great cattle horse.”

Every time Dean spoke, his voice became more animated. I was beginning to understand why he'd been so welcoming to my company. He seemed to enjoy meeting new people as much as I did.

I smiled back. "What's his name?"

"Coal."

"Can I meet him later?"

His eyes lit up. "Yeah, I'll get Giselda done and then we can go out back. You can even ride 'im if you want."

I leaned against the workbench. The hard wood pressed into my back while I crossed my ankles. Dean's hands moved quickly and efficiently over Giselda's hooves. His hands weren't as big as Flint's and watching Dean didn't make my pulse quicken.

As soon as I thought that, I wanted to slap my forehead. *Now, you're comparing guys to Flint?*

"So, you grow up around here?" I asked.

"No, I grew up in Wyoming. Just outside Laramie. My parents died a few years ago and left our family ranch to my oldest brother. I've got a share in it, but Joe can be hard to work with, so I thought I'd come ranchin' somewhere else for a while. Pete here was nice enough to offer me a job."

"So, how'd you meet Pete?"

Dean continued filing Giselda's hoof. The scraping sounds echoed in the barn. "He and Dad knew one another. I've known Pete since I was a boy . . ."

I listened contentedly to Dean's story. A while later, he finished up with Giselda. "Come on, girl." He led the mare out back. "Follow me, Lena," he called over his shoulder.

I followed him until we got to a pasture. Dean removed Giselda's halter and turned her loose. "So you want to get on Coal?" The bright sunlight reflected off his hat, shading his face, but I could still see his sparkling hazel eyes.

"Um, I don't know."

"Oh, come on," Dean said good naturedly. "I'll take care of ya." He guided me to another pasture and whistled sharply. In the distance, a large, beautiful horse lifted his head. He whinnied before breaking into a gallop. My eyes widened at the sight.

When Coal reached us, he slowed to a trot, then stopped a few feet from Dean. He blew forcefully through his nose.

My eyes traveled up his height and widened even more. He was huge, much bigger than the trail ride horses.

“Ah . . .” I took a step backward. “I don’t need to ride him. I can just pet him.”

Dean grinned. “You’ll be fine. Trust me. Coal’s real good with beginners.”

Dean proceeded to show me how to groom and saddle a horse. He then spent the next hour teaching me how to ride. It was a lot different from the trail rides. Coal didn’t have a horse in front of him to follow, therefore, I had to tell him what to do. Riding was also tiring. By the time the lesson finished, my legs felt like Jell-O.

“You did great!” Dean said when I steered Coal to his side. Dean grinned ear to ear, his eyes twinkling in the sunlight. He pulled off his hat and wiped the sweat from his brow.

“That was fun.” I patted Coal’s neck. The large gelding breathed heavily. Sweat shined on his coat. I was sweating too. A salty trail slid past my ear.

“Should I walk him?” I asked. “He feels really warm.”

“Yeah,” Dean said. “Yeah, of course, take ‘im back out to the ring.”

I walked Coal around a few times. It wasn’t until I was on my fourth cool-down lap that I realized we weren’t alone. My eyes widened when I saw our audience. Standing beside the barn were two other cowboys, Pete, Jet, Jasper and Flint. My eyes went to Flint’s. I thought a small smile covered his lips. With a blink, it was gone.

His averted gaze felt like an arrow through my heart. Five days of this and I still wasn’t used to it.

“You ready to get off?” Dean asked.

I slid off Coal’s back easily enough, but once I hit the ground, my legs buckled. Luckily, Dean caught me. A blush crept up my cheeks. Of course, everyone had seen my stumble, including Flint.

“Thanks,” I mumbled. “That was more work than I thought it would be.”

“You’ll probably be sore tomorrow.”

“You’re most definitely going to be right.”

Dean took Coal’s reins and led him to the barn. I followed. The group still watched. Jet smirked and Jasper grinned. I had no idea what Flint was doing since I made myself avoid him.

“Have ya met Tyler and Aaron?” Dean asked.

I shook my head.

The two cowboys stood beside one another, watching us. Tyler had a wiry build and skin that looked as though he spent all day in the sun. Aaron was meaty looking and big. I got a feeling off Tyler that was similar to Dean, but Aaron . . .

I frowned.

Something about Aaron’s gaze made me nervous. I switched my vision and tuned into the clouds that surrounded them. Tyler’s appeared normal. Aaron’s, however, made me pause midstride.

My mouth went dry.

Dean turned, seeming to notice I wasn’t beside him. I snapped my vision back to normal and began walking again. A sheen of sweat erupted across my body that had nothing to do with the bright sun.

When we reached everyone, Dean introduced me. “Lena, this here is Tyler and Aaron. Tyler’s been ranchin’ with Pete for years, but Aaron’s a bit new.”

Tyler held out his hand for me to shake. I shook it readily. Aaron did the same, but I hesitated a fraction of a second. I didn’t want to touch him. I didn’t want to be anywhere near him.

Swallowing, I took his palm. It was hot, big and felt like a vise seizing mine. When my eyes reached his, I had to stop myself from visibly flinching. A hunger filled his gaze that made me squirm. I withdrew my hand as quickly as I could.

I sought Flint. Relief poured through me when I found him watching me. That safe feeling once again settled over me, like a massage easing away the tension. Flint’s gaze flickered to Aaron’s before coming back to mine. I unconsciously took a step toward Flint.

At the last minute, I stopped. Once again, my reaction to Flint baffled me. I wasn’t a child. I’d grown used to taking care of myself. So why did I seek his comfort? And *why* did I feel so certain he would never let Aaron hurt me?

“You did pretty good on that horse, Lena,” Pete said, interrupting my thoughts.

“Oh.” I mentally shook myself. “Thanks, Pete.”

“First time riding outside of a trail ride?” he asked.

Since I had no idea how to answer that question, I nodded.

“You could give Mica a run for her money,” Tyler added. He sounded amused.

“Speaking of which, where is Mica?” I asked.

Jet rolled his eyes. “She’s off with Jessie, the other cowboy. The guests are on a big trail ride this afternoon. She was so eager to go, Pete let her. The rest of us have been moving cattle around.”

“Mica must be doing all right,” I replied. “If she’s helping Jessie on the trail ride.”

“Yeah, she’s been a great help this morning.” Tyler grinned. “She’s very enthusiastic.” There was a smile in his voice.

Coal pawed the ground behind us. “Should we unsaddle Coal?” I asked Dean. Even with Flint present, I still didn’t like being so close to Aaron. I also didn’t like that he hadn’t stopped watching me since I joined them.

Dean and I walked inside the barn. I breathed a sigh of relief when Aaron finally disappeared from view. Thankfully, Dean’s infectious good nature soon took hold. As the minutes ticked by, I felt more and more like myself. By the time we had Coal ready to turn to pasture, I was smiling again.

After we let Coal loose, I knew I needed to get back to the cabin. I had no idea what time it was and hoped it wasn’t past six. I thanked Dean again for the riding lesson. He told me to come back up the next day.

“Really?”

“Yeah, I’m up here most afternoons working on the horses. Come on back.”

The thought of riding again and hanging out with Dean had me smiling. “I’ll see you tomorrow.”

He tipped his hat. “See ya then.”

I felt Dean’s gaze linger on me as I turned to go. I waved one last goodbye. After my hand fell, my eyes flickered around, but as hard as I tried to find Aaron, it was as if he’d disappeared.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

I walked slowly back to the cabin. My thighs protested the entire way. About halfway down the hill, footsteps sounded behind me.

A mental picture of Aaron flashed through my mind. It was of him raising his hand to strike me down. Instinct took over. I whirled around, placed my feet farther apart and brought my fists up.

But it was only Flint.

He stopped a few feet away and held his hands up. “What’s wrong?”

I paused. “Ah, it’s nothing.” I dropped my fists. “I thought you might be Aaron.”

“And that makes you frightened?”

“Yeah. His cloud’s dark.”

Flint put his hands on his hips. An expression grew on his face. He didn’t seem happy. He was also dirty from a morning on the ranch and incredibly attractive in the sun. I wanted to kick myself for noticing.

“I wondered as much,” he said. “I could tell you were bothered by something when you met him. I haven’t been able to figure him out, but I don’t trust the guy.”

“You shouldn’t. I’d stay away from him if I were you.”

“It’s not myself I’m worried about.”

I balked at his gruff tone.

He raked a hand harshly through his hair. “Are you going to make it back to the cabin?”

I figured he noticed my less than graceful walk down the hill. “Yeah, I’ll be fine.”

“Do you know where Aaron is?”

I shook my head.

He frowned again. “I’ll walk with you.”

Before I had a chance to reply, he started walking which forced me to follow. I half expected him to stay ahead. Instead, he slowed his step and walked by my side, matching his longer stride to mine.

The sun shone upon us. Fresh, clean air swirled around. Neither of us said anything, and I was acutely aware of the awkward silence.

"What did you think of Dean?" Flint asked abruptly. He still stared straight ahead.

"Um, I like him. He seems really nice and genuine—generous too. He spent a long time teaching me about horses this afternoon."

"He certainly did." Flint said gruffly and ran a hand through his hair.

The silence stretched. I was about to ask him something really witty, like, *did you have lunch*, when he said, "You did well on that horse."

His compliment took me by surprise. "Um, thanks."

"Do you think you've ridden before?"

"I have no idea. Maybe?"

"Di and I talk about that a lot, about what we've done in our lives and what we haven't. Like driving. Di and I are pretty competent behind the wheel, but Jacinda's an accident waiting to happen, and I'm pretty sure Jet doesn't know where the brake is."

I laughed.

For a moment, I thought he was going to smile, but he didn't.

"So are we going to try to get permanent jobs on this ranch?" I asked.

"Did Di tell you that?"

"Yeah."

"Something like that is the plan."

I was about to ask him another question when he nodded ahead. "Looks like someone's waiting for you."

Di and Jacinda stood no more than ten yards away. I'd been so caught up in Flint, I hadn't noticed we were almost to the cabin. I hastily took a step away from him. Unconsciously, I'd inched closer and closer to him the longer we'd walked down the hill. I hoped Di hadn't noticed.

"Lena," Jacinda called. "Come on, we're going to be late."

"You better get going," Flint said.

I didn't want to leave. I liked being near Flint. I liked it too much. "Yeah, thanks for walking with me."

He didn't reply, but when I turned to go he said, "Lena?"

I actually shivered at the sound of my name on his lips. "Yeah?"

"Stay away from Aaron, okay?"

"I will."

"And tell Di and Jacinda about him. They need to know."

I TOLD DI and Jacinda about Aaron's cloud when we walked to the main house. Jacinda's eyes widened. Di merely pinched her lips together.

"Is he the only one here with a dark cloud?" Di asked.

"I don't know." Since coming to the ranch, I'd been lulled into a feeling of safety. Between the effects Flint had on me, always being in a group and getting to know Pete, Val and the guests, I'd never felt threatened. Beside the cowboys, I hadn't checked anyone's clouds.

"Then that's what I want you doing tonight. Assess everyone, and I mean everyone. Report back to me what you find," Di ordered.

I swallowed uneasily. "Um, okay."

By seven that night, everyone was in the dining room, including Flint and Aaron. I tried not to let Aaron affect me. He kept watching me, as if *I* was his meal.

Biting my lip, I glanced at Flint. That safe feeling once again enveloped me even though he ignored me. A part of me felt confused. That afternoon, Flint had seemed worried for me, but tonight, he hadn't said hello.

I sighed. Turning, I walked back to the kitchen. Di stood at the counter, helping with dessert.

"What'd you see?" she asked quietly.

"No one's dark. I don't think we need to worry about any of them."

Di nodded tightly. "So, it's just Aaron."

"Yeah, just Aaron." Although, that *just* didn't make it any better.

Once back in the dining room, my eyes darted to the cowboy's table again. Dean sat beside Tyler, and across from him, Aaron. The other cowboy I hadn't met yet sat beside him. He had black hair and looked Native American. I figured he must be Jessie.

Against my better judgment, I shifted my vision. Aaron's cloud readily appeared. Ugly, black, jagged edges darted around his skull and neck. It was unsettling to watch. With difficulty, I swallowed a grimace.

A few minutes later, Dean pushed his chair back from the table. The scraping sound echoed above the din. When he passed me on his way out, he smiled brightly and stopped.

"It'll be fun to do another riding lesson tomorrow," he said. "I'm looking forward to it."

I smiled back. "Yeah, me too."

“I bet you’d make a good cowgirl. Maybe you could join Mica and the rest of us instead of working in here.”

I shrugged uncertainly. “Well . . . I’m not sure if we’re fully employed. We’re just helping out right now.”

Dean smiled. “You will be. I heard Pete and Val talking. They’re going to offer you all jobs. They said something about you not having any plans, so maybe you’d want to stick around for a while.”

“Really?” My mouth dropped. Was that Di’s plan all along? To let Pete and Val think that *they’d* come up with the idea of hiring us? It was an incredibly manipulative tactic that Di seemed to have pulled off flawlessly.

“Lena?” Dean said.

“Oh, um.” I glanced toward the kitchen. I wondered what Val would think if another one of us disappeared to the outdoor work. “I’m not sure Val would approve if I left. She needs the help in here.”

Dean grinned. “Right, what was I thinking. A woman’s place is in the kitchen.” He winked.

I laughed at his joke. His eyes lighted up even more. We spoke for a few more minutes before he left. When he finally disappeared out the door, a strange sensation flowed in the air. My body followed the feeling on its own accord.

My eyes locked with Flint’s. I realized that strange power sensation was coming off him again. He averted his gaze. Abruptly, he stood and stalked out the door. My breath came out in a whoosh. I hadn’t realized I’d been holding it.

With Flint gone, the strange power slowly dissipated. I jolted back to my surroundings. My eyes flashed to each table. Everyone carried on eating, talking and laughing. They all seemed oblivious to the heavy energy that just flowed through the room like invisible syrup.

“You want to give me a hand, Lena?” Di held up a tub full of dirty dishes.

“Right, of course.” I shook myself.

I joined her in the kitchen. However, I still couldn’t shake off whatever had just transpired in that room. How was it that nobody felt that energy off Flint? It was so strong at times, it took my breath away.

DEAN WAS RIGHT about Val and Pete. The next day, they offered us jobs until the season was over. Di’s plan had worked.

Consequently, Di, Jacinda and I began working in the kitchen. Since Val only needed two of us we had a number of days off, also like Di anticipated.

Over the next week, we fell into a steady routine as we waited for the new girl. It was pretty much the same each day. Our day started at six. We'd help Val with breakfast and then clean cabins all morning. After that, we made lunch, did dinner prep and then we had off until six at night. It was a split shift but I didn't mind. We were off during the nicest part of the day.

The other routine I'd fallen into? Every afternoon, I joined Dean for a riding lesson. A few times I considered asking Di or Flint if I could join them when they ventured to internet cafes, but I didn't. Being around Flint and seeing the closeness he shared with Di hurt too much.

I felt weak because of that. I wished I could force those feelings away or bury them in some hidden chest deep within my mind, but every time I saw Flint—those feelings exploded. I had no control over them. Besides, Di and Flint seemed to work well together. Maybe it was best to leave them up to finding answers. The rest of the group seemed to have done just that. Still, that didn't sit well with me. I wanted answers more than anything and passively waiting was growing increasingly frustrating.

Riding and joking with Dean, however, helped keep my mind off Flint and our strange situation. It was the only thing that stilled the longing in my heart, or at least, allowed me to ignore it for a brief amount of time.

"Afternoon, Lena!" Dean's cheerful voice called. I'd just finished the steep climb to the barn. Once again, he waited for me at the top.

"Hi, Dean."

"You ready?" His hazel eyes shone brightly, a big smile plastered on his face. "I brought Coal into the barn for you to saddle. I already brushed 'im."

"You did?"

"Yeah, I was thinkin' maybe we'd do somethin' fun today. How 'bout a trail ride?"

"Really?" We'd never done that before.

"Sure, I'll show you some of the ranch that you can't see on the guest trail rides. You've learned enough you'll be just fine, even if Coal gets spooked. It's a great afternoon to go out."

I glanced at the sky. Nothing but endless blue.

After we had our horses ready, we walked them out back and mounted. Warm air swirled in the breeze, but I tied my jacket around my waist anyway. Dean had warned me of how erratic mountain weather could be.

"Have you ever gone back this way?" Dean asked, turning in his saddle. We walked past the maze of corrals and pens.

I shook my head. "No. I've only been on the group trail rides." Those usually went in the opposite direction and stayed in the lower regions. Dean seemed to be taking us up, not down.

Dean grinned. "I'll be sure to give ya a good tour then."

I smiled and sank deeper into the saddle.

We ventured slowly into the mountains. The black specs of cattle on the hills grew larger as Dean pointed out landmarks.

"You see that over there?" He nodded to a sharply pointed mountain. "That's called the witch's tit."

"The witch's *what*?"

Dean chuckled. "The witch's tit. And that," he pointed to an area of mountains and trees that were pointed at the top and fanned out at the bottom, "is called her broomstick."

"Why didn't they call the witch's tit the witch's hat?"

Dean grinned. "I dunno. It was named long ago by lonely miners. I'm sure you can guess where their minds were."

I laughed.

The ranch soon became a distant speck behind us. We dipped and turned around hills and cliffs. Birds sang. Chipmunks and squirrels ran along tree branches and fluttered under leaves. Scents of pine and horse filled the air. It was incredibly pleasant.

"It's so beautiful out here," I said.

Dean nodded. "This is God's country."

I smiled. For once, I didn't feel the anxiety that accompanied me since meeting Flint and learning how scary our situation was. It felt so good, freeing almost. If I had known the mountains could do this to me, I would have ventured out here sooner.

About an hour later, we passed through a shallow creek. I had no idea where we were in relation to the ranch, but Dean pointed to the ravine. "You ever get lost out here, ya look to see which way the water's movin'. This stream connects to a bigger river that's not far from the ranch. You just

follow that, or any other stream you find, until ya get to it. Most of the creeks around here dump into that river."

I sincerely hoped I'd never get lost in this wilderness. This may be God's country, but out here, it was every man for himself.

We trailed up another mountain. Dean pointed to a swamp of trees that were so dense it seemed impossible to enter. "Ya see that over there?"

I shaded my eyes. "Yeah."

"That place is called the Forbidden Hills. It's a good way to get lost and never come back. Many men have ventured into that forest to never return. The hills are too dark and the trees too dense. Even mountain men get turned around in there. It's best to stay away from it."

I swallowed uneasily. "Okay."

Dean laughed. "It's kinda like the Bermuda Triangle of Colorado. Scientists from all over the world have come to study it, but nobody can figure out why the crazy things happen in it. GPS's randomly won't work. Hikers swear they lose their bearin's within a few minutes of enterin' the trees. People have gone in and never come back." His joking words died, his face serious. "They're dangerous, the Forbidden Hills. I mean it when I say to stay out. None of the locals will go in there, but every now and then, we'll get a tourist lookin' for a thrill. They never make it far before they turn around and run out. Trust me. It's best to just stay away."

A chill ran through me. "I will."

A few hours later, the ranch appeared. It popped up so quickly I hadn't realized we were so close.

"We're almost back," I exclaimed.

"Less than a mile from here."

I nudged Coal forward until we were beside Dean and his mount. A smile grew on my face. "Race ya!"

Before Dean could respond, I kicked Coal into a gallop. The huge gelding sprang into action. We flew across the landscape.

Exhilaration ran through me at the feel of Coal's powerful hooves pounding into the terrain and the air whooshing past. I'd never gone this fast before, but it was almost a straight shot to the barn.

Thundering hoof beats came from behind me. Dean followed in hot pursuit, but he still lagged a few lengths back. Razz was doing his best to catch Coal, but the smaller stallion was no match for Coal's long legs. I urged Coal to go faster. We left them in the dust.

A few minutes later, we reached the pastures and pens behind the barn. A hundred yards after that, the barn approached. I sat up straighter, not realizing I'd been hunched over Coal's neck as we thundered across the land.

"Easy, boy." Coal instantly responded to my shifting weight. He slowed to a canter and then bumpy trot. I trotted in a circle and turned. Dean was still galloping at the last pasture. He slowed as he got closer to the barn.

"Damn, girl, you can ride!"

I grinned.

Dean smiled, an ear breaking grin that stretched across his face. "We better walk 'em."

We walked the horses to the end of the pastures and back again. By the time we reached the barn, both horses had cooled.

"That was a lot of fun," I said. "Thanks for taking me."

"My pleasure. We should do it again."

"Definitely." I swung my leg to get off Coal but paused. Something pulsed into my back. A wave of energy hit me.

Looking awkwardly over my shoulder, I spotted Flint standing by the barn. His arms were crossed. Power radiated off him in hot waves. It was so strong, I physically felt it.

I tried to balance my boot in the stirrup, but another push of his power hit me. The next thing I knew, my foot slipped and I was falling. Before I could shriek, strong arms encircled me and a tight voice whispered into my ear.

"Just what the hell do you think you're doing?" Flint seethed.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Flint caught me so abruptly, the air whooshed out of my lungs. It took me a minute to catch my breath. “What . . . how . . .” I stammered.

Dean interrupted. “Flint? Where’d you come from?” The cowboy cocked his head, a puzzled expression on his face.

Flint still had his hard arms around me. I wondered if Dean had seen Flint’s mind-numbing speed as Flint raced the twenty yards from the barn to where I’d fallen off Coal. From the innocent curiosity in Dean’s voice, I guessed not.

I still reeled from how fast Flint moved. Other than him rearranging the furniture that one morning, I’d never seen what he was capable of.

“Did you *fall?”* Dean asked incredulously.

I nodded numbly and tried to stand. Flint and I still huddled close to the ground. However, I couldn’t get my tongue working. How could his arms be so hard? They felt like steel.

Before I could get my knees to straighten, Flint stood and set me back on my feet. The ground, however, didn’t cooperate. It swayed. Or perhaps, I swayed. My head spun from how close Flint stood.

“Thank you.” I did a double take when I saw Flint’s expression. Thunderous, was the first word that came to mind. His eyes shot sparks at Dean.

“Lena?” Dean said. “We should probably put the horses away.” His gaze didn’t leave Flint’s.

“Right. Excuse me.” I sidestepped Flint and pulled Coal to the barn, but Flint’s question stopped me.

“How far did you take her?” He stared at Dean.

Dean shrugged. “To the Forbidden Hills and back.”

“You took her all the way to the Forbidden Hills?” Flint said, his voice rising. He placed his hands on his hips. Once again, raw power radiated off him. The force of it hit me like a wave. I gasped and stepped back.

Dean didn’t seem to notice the energy pouring off Flint. Instead, he slid off Razz and put his hands on his hips too. Both men stared at each other. The stallion pawed the ground and flung his head. Apparently, I wasn’t the only one feeling the charged atmosphere.

“Did you consider what would happen if she’d fallen off or gotten hurt out there?” Flint asked.

“She wasn’t gonna fall,” Dean said. “She’s a solid rider.”

“She just learned a week ago.”

“Well, she’s the most natural rider I’ve ever met!”

Both men now stood within a foot of one another. I briefly thought of a Clint Eastwood movie. I waited for guns to be drawn and a shootout to begin.

“Ah, excuse me. I’m still here, you know.” I blew at an annoying curl that kept fluttering in front of my face.

Dean shook his head and took a step back. “Sorry, Lena.”

Flint stayed put, his shoulders bunched. He still glared at Dean. “Did you think to tell anyone where you were going? What if something happened? How would we have known where to look for you?”

By *we*, I assumed he meant himself and the other cowboys. Not *moi*. But instead of Dean coming back with a smart comment, something Flint said seemed to touch a chord in him.

“We were never in any danger,” Dean said, although his voice didn’t sound so sure.

“Yeah,” I replied. “No danger at all. We were only walking in the woods.”

“Walking?” Flint spun, facing me. The intensity of his gaze made me step back. I resisted the urge to take another step back when he leaned forward. “You call that neck breaking gallop into the barn, *walking?”*

I stood up taller and put my hands on my hips. “Well, yes, actually, we were walking. The entire time out there we were walking.”

“Then how do you explain what I saw just a minute ago?”

“So we raced in, what’s the big deal?”

“The big deal?” he said, his voice tight. “The big deal is that you could have fallen off and gotten hurt.”

“So?”

“So?”

“Yeah, so? What’s it to you, anyway?”

Something in his face changed, but abruptly it disappeared. “You’re my responsibility, that’s why,” he said gruffly.

I didn’t think he could have said anything worse to hurt me. I was his responsibility. It was his duty to protect me, nothing more. My heart broke right there. That was all I’d ever be to him even though something about him pulled at me like gravity. Just his presence made me want to step closer, to touch him and feel his muscles bunch and tighten beneath my fingertips. My body was helpless to resist. It was impossible for me to ignore my attraction to him.

Not wanting him to see the tears that burned my eyes, I turned and stalked to the barn. Dean called out, but I ignored him too. How could I have been so stupid? I’d actually hoped that maybe, just *maybe*, Flint cared for me. Maybe a little. But why would he?

Flint appeared at my side, hands in his pockets, head down. “Lena?” he said quietly.

I ignored him and kept walking. I couldn’t speak. My voice would probably break. A breeze swirled around us. I pushed another curl behind my ear.

“Lena?”

If I didn’t know better, I’d say there was an ache in his voice, but I *did* know better, so I knew I imagined it.

“Lena,” he repeated, sounding exasperated. “I’m sorry.”

I stopped. My chest rose and fell quickly. I was pretty sure my skin was even paler than normal. For some reason, that happened when I got hurt, angry, frustrated, and all of the other emotions I felt right now. I concentrated on the anger. That was the easiest to feel.

“Did you just say you were sorry?” I turned toward him and cursed the stupid, bright sun that made me squint when I looked up. “Whatever for?”

He either didn’t hear my sarcasm or chose to ignore it. “For . . .” he began, then stopped.

I raised my eyebrows.

He didn’t say anything. Something flashed across his face again. Those damned, fleeting emotions that never lasted longer than a second. I swatted at another curl, my frustration growing. Tapping my foot, I waited for him to continue. He didn’t.

“Just forget it.” I turned and walked the remaining steps to the barn. I half expected Flint to say something and secretly hoped he would. I waited

for him to call out, but he didn't. Nothing but a soft breeze whistling through the rafters reached my ears. I turned.

Flint was nowhere to be seen.

I spun around. Was he really gone? I ran to the end of the barn and then back to where Dean stood. There was no sign of him.

"Have you seen Flint?" I asked Dean.

He shook his head. "No. Why, he leave?"

"I guess so."

Dean sighed. "Good." He turned back to his horse.

AFTER THAT INCIDENT at the barn, Flint went back to ignoring me. Unless social niceties required he talk to me, it was as though I didn't exist.

I attempted to make myself feel better as I got ready for work the next night. I searched for one of the trendy tops Jacinda bought me. It was almost six in the evening. I didn't have much time so cursed when I couldn't find it. After digging through my mountain of clothes on the floor, I finally spotted it.

Jacinda insisted fashion was therapy. Beautiful clothes always made her smile. I had yet to experience that euphoria, but considering my mood today, I was willing to try.

Muted colors of green, lavender, gold and ivory flowed around me in the peasant style top. The material felt nice. I had to agree with that. However, a heaviness still hung in my heart. Just the thought of Flint was like tying an anchor to my mood. It sank.

A noise sounded in the hall. Jacinda stood outside my door, grinning. She held a finger up and told me to wait. She sailed down the hall and returned a minute later.

"Wear these with it," she instructed. She held up gold, hoop earrings. A hint of her jasmine perfume floated around me as she surveyed my legs. "Now, to go with the top . . ." She eyed my skinny jeans in the closet.

"No," I replied. "Don't even go there."

I picked up my favorite cut-off jean shorts from the floor and pulled them on before slipping on simple, white canvas sneakers. They were broken-in and comfortable for work.

Surprisingly, Jacinda clapped in approval. "Lena! You just put together your first cute outfit!"

I rolled my eyes but couldn’t stop my reluctant smile. “Come on, we’re running late.”

Di was in a mood too, evident in the way she grumbled and paced in her bedroom. Apparently, the new girl changed direction again, opting for a bus heading for Arizona versus Colorado. In other words, she wasn’t arriving this week.

Half an hour later, Jacinda and I were setting up the buffet. Jacinda’s eyes still twinkled every time we bumped into one another. She didn’t try to hide her excitement over my sudden fashion interest.

I didn’t burst her bubble that it was a one-off interest. So far, all the pretty top had done was get in the way when I tried to lift things. The damned top was too tight in the shoulders.

“Lena, you look great!” Dean called. His voice snapped my attention from the buffet. The cowboy stood at the side door, and for once, arrived early.

The other cowboys, and cowgirl, stood behind him—Tyler, Jessie, Aaron and Mica. Jet, Jasper and Flint were nowhere to be seen. I avoided Aaron, even though I felt his eyes on me. To quell my unease, I locked my gaze on Dean.

“Thanks. Where are the other guys?” I asked.

“Still out working.” Mica dusted her hat off on her jeans. “Pete sent them off to round up the last cows that wandered onto the north ridge.”

I envisioned Flint and the twins on horseback wandering around the hills. Did that mean they wouldn’t make it back in time for supper?

“You gonna join us for the meal tonight?” Dean asked.

I held up what I arranged on the buffet. “Gotta work.”

Dean shrugged. “Worth a try.” He squeezed my shoulder when he walked by. His hand was large, not as big as Flint’s, but still, it swallowed my upper arm. I wanted to kick myself for liking the feel of Flint’s hands more.

The cowboys and Mica followed Dean. They were all dirty, dusty and towered over me. I smiled pleasantly at everyone except for Aaron.

The next hour passed slowly. Dean was right about Jet, Jasper and Flint. They never made it back for supper. I still couldn’t stop my eyes from going to the door every few minutes to see if they’d arrived. Since the incident at the barn, the only times I’d seen Flint had been in passing at meals. I couldn’t help but feel he was avoiding me even more than usual.

The cowboys all talked and laughed throughout the meal, obliviously happy and content. My gaze scanned everyone in the hall, one by one. I hadn't realized I'd switched my vision until it passed over Aaron and his ugly, evil cloud rose like a tidal wave. It hovered above him, swimming around his neck and through his hair. The shifting ebony colors were like a gigantic eel that slithered against his skull. I snapped my sight back to normal and swirled out of the dining room. I couldn't get to the kitchen fast enough.

When the meal finished, Jacinda approached. "Hey, Little L? Val needs to go into town to get supplies and said that one of us can go with her. Do you want to go or stay here and clean up?"

From the sparkle in Jacinda's eyes, I knew she wanted to go. While she liked the ranch, at heart, she was a city girl and used every excuse to get into Little Raven, even though it wasn't a sprawling metropolis.

"You go," I replied. "I'll stay here and clean up."

"You don't mind?"

"Not at all." I didn't mention that I still felt like a freak in town. It didn't seem my first impression on the locals was wearing off anytime soon.

"Okay, we'll be back in a few hours." Jacinda flashed her supermodel smile. I knew she was ecstatic. I only got *that* smile when she was really happy.

After they left, I took my time with everything. By the time I finished, the dining tables gleamed, and the floor shined. Cleanliness always made Val happy.

I stepped out into the night and felt a little better. Nothing like productivity to calm a heartbroken spirit. I took a deep breath. Scents of horse, grass, cattle and clean mountain air filled the night air. I was growing to love that smell.

It was chilly, so I took off at a brisk pace. Pete told me, way back on the day he'd picked me up, that the ranch's high altitude accounted for a number of crisp evenings, even during the summer. He hadn't been kidding. Goosebumps rose on my arms faster than a rabbit running from a coyote.

The farther I traveled from the house, the quieter the night became. No lights shone inside the guest cabins lining the drive, all looked deserted. It was then I remembered tonight's entertainment included a big bonfire down

by the river. No wonder no guests lingered. I rubbed my chilled arms and kept walking.

Thump, thump, thump.

I abruptly stopped. The breeze tossed curls into my eyes. What had that been?

Scanning the darkness, I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. Faint light from the main house shone in the distance. Other than that, inky night surrounded me. I still stood a fair distance from my cabin so scanned the area again. I didn't see anyone. I cocked my head, listening.

Just the nighttime sounds. That was it.

Shrugging, I began walking again. I'd only gone ten yards when the same sound came. I swirled around. There was *definitely* something behind me.

The hairs on the back of my neck stood up. I froze. I looked around but still didn't see anything. I looked left and then right. Nothing. But I felt . . . *something*.

"Is anyone there?" I called. I waited a moment.

Silence.

"Hello?" I said.

Nothing.

I waited a second longer, but I could still feel it. My sixth sense told me I wasn't alone. I started to breathe faster. *Someone is near and doesn't want me to know it.* I felt as certain of that as I knew the sky was blue.

Without another thought, I turned and sprinted. My feet scissored beneath me as a survival instinct roared to life. I bolted for the cabin as fast as I could go.

I couldn't be sure, but I thought I heard someone behind me. The *thump, thump* on the gravel grew faster, more pronounced. That almost made me shriek, but then I saw the cabin. It was still far. The small building had only crested my view on the gravel drive, but the shining living room light beckoned safety.

I breathed harder and moved my legs faster. The breeze whipped across my face, all pleasant scents gone.

The distance closed. Forty yards. Thirty yards. Twenty yards. Ten yards! I was almost there when a dark figure stepped out in front of me.

I screamed.

The sound abruptly died when I slid to a careening halt. The sudden stop pitched me off balance. I almost tripped.

The figure reached out and grabbed me. I screamed again, the sound piercing my own ears, but then I recognized a scent.

Spice, wood and tangerines.

Flint.

"It's just me," Flint said gruffly, concern lacing his words. "Why are you running?"

He pulled me to a dark, empty cabin a few cabins up from ours. Tall grass tickled my calves. I panted from running and clung tightly to his forearms.

"Why were you running?" he asked again, more firmly this time.

I could only breathe loudly.

"Lena?"

I took a staggering breath and struggled to get myself under control. His fingers grasped my chin and tilted my head up. In the moonlight, his angular features were sharp and severe, his eyes black.

"Jesus," he whispered. "What happened?"

I was still too stunned to speak.

"Did somebody hurt you?" He gripped my shoulders tighter. Hot energy rolled off him. I shook my head. Already, the fear I'd felt was rapidly disintegrating. *Safe, I'm safe*. Once again, that soothing, precious feeling flowed through me in his presence.

"Lena, what happened?" His breath was warm and sweet. It was hard to not lose all coherent thought.

"Nothing," I finally managed. "I don't know." I shook my head as I tried to figure out what *had* happened.

A few other times, in Rapid City, I felt that someone was after me. It was usually at night when I was out wandering around with Frida, a woman I'd met. Both times it happened, I listened to my gut, pulling Frida with me. We'd run as fast as we could to a more populated area. I'd never know if those fears had been valid, but I trusted my gut. It was all I'd had.

"Did something scare you?" Flint asked.

All I could do was nod.

"What?" he demanded. Another huge wave of energy rolled off him.

"I heard someone. Someone was following me when I was about halfway back. I could feel that I wasn't alone, but nobody answered when I

asked who was there."

"Where?" he asked, his tone clipped.

I explained where I was when I first heard it. I was about to mumble that I might have been mistaken when the air whooshed around me. My breath caught in my throat.

I was flying.

Before I could think two words, I stood on my cabin's porch.

Flint was gone.

It all happened so quickly, it took me a minute to process it. My eyes widened when I did.

Flint just *carried* me up the road to my porch. I searched for him in the distance. He'd vanished into the night.

"Lena? Is that you?" A tapping sound made me turn.

Mica's face pressed against the glass. She was sitting at the kitchen table, visible through the window. She smiled and waved.

I returned the wave as best I could before walking inside. The feeling of being chased, the sensation of being near Flint, and the incredible way he'd moved me ten yards in two seconds left me dumbstruck.

"What took you so long?" she asked when I stepped inside. She was reading a book. A cup of half-drunk juice sat beside her.

Instead of responding, I walked to the bathroom. I closed the door and placed my hands on the sink. I leaned into them. Harsh breaths escaped me. My fingers gripped the porcelain bowl tightly, the smooth basin hard and unforgiving.

A few minutes later, finally feeling in control, I looked up. My face stared back in the mirror. I was a little paler than normal. Other than that, I looked like myself. Dark red curls tumbled down my back. My green eyes appeared particularly alert but not out of the ordinary. I splashed cold water on my face and returned to the living room.

"Where's Jacinda?" Mica had moved to the couch, the book on her lap.

"She went to town with Val," I replied automatically. I sat beside Mica and pulled my feet underneath me. The couch's upholstery felt rough and worn. A second later, an abrupt whoosh of air had me sitting straight up, but it was only Flint, barreling through the cabin's door.

"Nothing," he said. "I searched the whole area but didn't find anyone." His eyes shone like two, onyx daggers darting through me. I wondered how

far he'd gone. With how fast he moved, he'd probably covered a few square miles.

"Okay," I replied. "Do you think I imagined it?"

"No." He didn't elaborate.

Mica fidgeted beside me just as Di appeared in her bedroom doorway.

Wide-eyed, Mica said, "What happened?"

Before Flint or I could respond, commotion sounded on the porch. Jacinda pushed through the door passed Flint, carrying several bags.

"Hey, guys," Jacinda said pleasantly. She sailed to the small kitchenette and placed the bags on the counter. "I bought us some more coffee and that cereal you like, Mica. Lena, I bought you a new pair of earrings. I hope you don't mind." Her chatter died down, the rustling from the plastic bags dying with it.

Jacinda frowned and surveyed all of us. Di, in her usual all-black attire, crossed her arms. "Something's happened," Di said.

Flint nodded curtly. "Someone was following Lena."

"What?" Jacinda's face paled. "Are you serious?"

"Where?" Di demanded.

"On her way back to the cabin," Flint said.

"Do you know who it was?" Jacinda asked.

Flint shook his head.

Di eyed all of us. "Right, no one is to be alone outside at night anymore. Got it?" She turned back to Flint. "Are you going to tell the guys?"

"I will, but I don't think Jet or Jasper will be too worried. What's the likelihood of someone attacking a male?"

Di frowned and replied in a quieter tone, "Unless it has something to do with us." She made a motion toward her tattoo.

My eyes widened. I hadn't thought of that possibility.

"Hmm." Flint's lips tightened.

Di turned to the three of us. "I don't want any of us alone anymore at night. Okay?"

"Should we tell Pete?" Mica asked.

Di and Flint dipped their heads and started whispering. I couldn't hear what was said. I knew Jacinda did from the way she perked up. When they stopped, Di said, "For the time being, no."

I swallowed. They were obviously concerned enough about our situation to not want Pete and Val involved.

Flint eyed me. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yeah, fine.”

His gaze lingered. Jacinda had sat beside Mica and me, her hands clasped tightly in her lap. Di on the other hand, stared out the window, looking deep in thought.

Only Mica seemed unperturbed. She picked up her book again. “Not many boring nights around here!”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

When I walked up to the main house the next morning, I kept thinking about the previous night. Had someone really followed me? How likely was that? And could it really be related to what happened to us all those months ago? I shivered at that thought.

Since it was my day off, the dining room was in full swing by the time I got there. I grabbed a few slices of toast and a cup of coffee.

Flint sat on the other side of the room with the cowboys. I tried not to stare. Something about him looked different.

It took me a minute to place it. Stubble lined his cheeks. Dark smudges blackened the skin under his eyes. He looked tired. That was a first. I'd never seen him as anything but clean-cut and alert looking.

Mica appeared just as I finished. "It's your day off, right? We're taking the guests on a nature walk. Wanna come?"

Since I didn't have anything planned, I nodded. "Sure."

As usual, Flint ignored me when I passed. Even after last night, nothing had changed. My heart sank.

A group of guests, most of them kids, were already waiting outside. I smiled at the kids and let the magic of being around people work through me. When I dipped down to talk to the little ones, I got a few giggles. That made me smile.

It was nice to be outside for a change. I was glad I brought my windbreaker, though. It had cooled considerably, and a low cloud cover was moving in.

"Nice to have you with us, Lena." Pete stood in the yard and smiled warmly before beckoning the kids and parents to join him.

"We'll be goin' on a nature walk today," Pete said. "We'll be talkin' about the plants of Colorado, specifically, the ones that grow around here. Now to start, can anyone tell me how plants are named?"

One of the girl's hand shot in the air. "They're named in an old language so everyone calls them the same."

“That’s right,” Pete said. “All plants are given Latin names and common names. The Latin names were developed long ago by . . .”

A famous botanist named Linnaeus. I reeled inwardly when the knowledge spewed out of my brain. *Here we go again.*

Once again, random knowledge escaped from some unknown cavern deep within my subconscious. If only I could do that with my identity. I groaned inwardly. I was certain, more than ever, that I’d been educated at some point in my life.

A few hours later, we returned to the main house. Everyone climbed the steps just in time for lunch.

“What did you think?” Mica asked. Mica also helped with the tour. She knew all of the Latin names too.

“You did great. Did Pete teach you that Latin stuff?” I asked as the last guest trailed inside.

“No, I already know it.”

I sighed. “So we’re all like that.”

We walked into the house, the door closing softly behind us. Mica stomped the mud from her boots on the rug.

“Do you think we all went to college?” I asked. “Or some advanced prep school?” Considering how much we knew, it didn’t seem like your every day school program explained it.

“We must have, cause you have to admit, we know a lot. And it’s not like I’m the smartest person in the world,” Mica replied.

I also didn’t think I was the next Albert Einstein. However, it was almost eerie at how much was crammed in our heads.

“Why do you think we can remember so much, but can’t remember ourselves?”

Mica shrugged. “I don’t know. Your best bet is to ask Flint or Di. They spend a lot of time talking about this stuff. Ooh! Pizza for lunch! Yum!”

She raced into the dining room. I sighed and followed.

Jacinda, Di and Val were hard at work when I entered the hall. I couldn’t help but wonder if the three were having a hard time keeping up without me. There were two additional families at the ranch this week. No doubt the new girl would come in handy when she arrived, if Val and Pete were happy to hire her too. I wondered how we’d explain that one. It was kind of weird after all, to just randomly show up with another person, as if out of thin air.

I loaded a plate with food and sat beside Mica.

“You okay?” Mica asked. She had almost half a pizza on her plate.

I forced a smile. “Just thinking about something.”

“What?”

I pushed around the slice with my fork. “Do we all go to pick up the new girl?”

“Yep, or at least, that’s what we’ve done so far. Flint doesn’t like us getting split up for too long. He thinks it’s safer that way.”

Of course he does. That only made my shoulders slump more. Flint felt responsible for everyone. His interest in me had never been any different.

Jacinda sauntered over just as Mica stood to refill her drink. Jacinda pulled out Mica’s chair and sat. Her expression seemed particularly coy today. “Talk to Flint much this morning?” she asked.

I shook my head and bit off a large bite of pizza. “No.”

Jacinda rolled her eyes. “Really, Little L, do you have to chew with your mouth open?”

A blush crept up my cheeks. I didn’t mean to have bad table manners. I forced my lips closed and tried to eat more daintily. It was hard. It didn’t seem the starvation mentality I’d acquired those first few months was wearing off anytime soon.

“Sorry,” I mumbled.

Jacinda leaned forward. “Back to Flint. I just wondered if you saw how tired he looked this morning?”

I thought about the dark circles on his too-handsome face. “Yeah, I noticed.”

“Any idea why that is?”

I shook my head and took another bite. I was careful to keep my mouth closed through the *entire* bite. Seriously, I would get good at this.

Jacinda placed her forearms on the table. Her perfectly manicured nails curled around her elbows. “Do you know where Flint was last night?”

“No.”

“Care to take a guess?”

I raised an eyebrow.

“Okay, okay. I was just asking.” She sighed. “Well, just so you know, he spent the entire night outside our cabin. He didn’t sleep a wink.”

I cocked my head. “Why would he do that?”

“I think he was keeping watch, but he didn’t want us to know he was there. Of course, I still heard him. He made a racket every time he did one of his rounds.” She rolled her eyes, her delicate eyebrows rising.

“But *why* would he do that?”

Jacinda cocked her head. “I think to keep you safe.”

“You mean from whoever chased me last night?”

“I think so.”

That took me aback. “Don’t you think he wanted to keep *everyone* safe?”

Jacinda bit her lip. “I don’t think so.”

“Why don’t you think so?”

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out. He’s been weird ever since you arrived.”

I tried to keep my voice even. “What do you mean?”

“The way he is with you. It hasn’t escaped my attention that he’s always avoiding you or only speaking to you when necessary. *And* he doesn’t hang out with us anymore. Before you arrived, we all hung out. Now that you’re here, though, he’s completely distanced himself. But then he gets all irritated when one of the cowboys grabs your attention. Not to mention, I’ve never seen him go so crazy when he thinks you’re in trouble.”

My mouth dropped. I shook my head. “Wait a minute, he doesn’t get irritated about the cowboys. What are you talking about?”

Jacinda smirked. “Do you think he likes how much time you spend with Dean?”

I had no idea what she was getting at. Flint didn’t know I spent my afternoons with the cowboy. He had no idea what I did. Right? But then I remembered the incident at the barn, when he’d known I’d been on a trail ride with Dean.

“But Dean and I are just friends.”

“Is that what you call it?” Before I could reply, she added, “You wouldn’t know this, but Flint hasn’t been the same since you arrived. He’s moody and withdrawn—more so than usual. Even Di’s noticed since he’s snapping at her now. He won’t tell her why, but personally, I think it’s because of you.”

I balked. “Jacinda, that doesn’t make sense. Aren’t he and Di *together*?”

“Together?” Jacinda’s eyebrows rose clear to her hairline.

“Like dating or something?”

She grinned and then laughed. She pushed to standing when Mica returned.

“What are you guys talking about?” Mica held a full glass of lemonade and took a drink.

“Nothing,” Jacinda said.

“So, are you gonna join us this afternoon?” Mica asked me. “Pete’s gonna show the guests how to use a lasso.”

I shook my head. My head was still spinning from all that Jacinda implied. “Um, no, I think I’ll join Dean for another riding lesson.” The truth, however, was that I wanted to get into the mountains. I needed some time to think. I couldn’t do that during a lasso lesson.

“Oh,” Mica said, shoulders slumping.

I turned to Jacinda. “You should go with Mica. You could learn how to rope calves.”

Jacinda’s nose wrinkled. “No, thank you.”

“Are you sure?” Mica asked.

Jacinda looked as if she’d rather drink paint than work with cows. “Not for me.” She turned her gaze back to me. “Have fun with *Dean*.”

I rolled my eyes. “Goodbye, Jacinda.”

I followed Mica out of the dining room, but Jacinda’s comments still lingered in the back of my mind. It also didn’t escape my attention that she never replied to my question about Flint and Di.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Dean and I went on another trail ride. We spent a few hours meandering through the hills. I often wondered how Dean got any work done since he spent the majority of his afternoons with me. However, he continually assured me that he rose early and did most of his work then.

Jacinda's comments made me wonder, though. I studied Dean while we rode. He was being friendly because he was my *friend*. Or at least, I'd always thought so.

Scents of leather filled the barn as we wiped down the heavy, western saddles.

"Want to sit together at dinner tonight?" Dean asked as he lifted his saddle to its post.

My hand stilled. It wasn't the first time Dean had asked me to join him. Of course, most days he asked I was working. Since it was my day off, however, I was free.

Still, I paused. "Uh, sure," I finally replied.

Dean grinned.

When dinner finally rolled around, I couldn't believe how nervous I felt. I inwardly cursed Jacinda. If it weren't for her, I wouldn't have thought twice about eating with Dean. As it was, my hands sweated like a glass of ice water on a hot summer day. I kept rubbing them against my jeans as I walked to the main house.

"This isn't a date. It's *not* a date," I whispered as I entered the dining hall. If it was a date, Dean would have picked me up at my cabin. He didn't. Therefore, it *wasn't* a date.

"Lena!" Dean called. He sat at a table.

Oh crap.

He'd obviously showered and was dressed in the nicest clothes I'd seen him in: clean jeans and a clean flannel. I walked stiffly forward until I was at his side. A waft of cologne drifted my way, the dust and horse smells that normally clung to him absent.

Even though this was feeling more and more like a date, I couldn't stop my smile. I'd never seen Dean without a cowboy hat. The tan on his face was pretty amusing. The upper half of his face shone white, the lower half deeply tanned.

I swallowed a smile and sat beside him. "Hi."

He cocked his head. "What's so funny?"

I hurriedly coughed. "What? Oh, nothing."

His gaze twinkled. "Come on. I'm not letting you off the hook that easy."

I smiled again but this time couldn't stop my laugh. I pointed at his face. "That's an interesting tan you have there."

He reached up, as if not understanding. I brought my hand to my nose and placed it horizontally across my face.

It clicked. He chuckled and then laughed deeply. "Oh, yeah. It's from the cowboy hat."

"Figured as much."

"You should get a hat. Then you could look as cool as me."

"You're right. It is a pretty fashionable tan. I should look into that."

Dean laughed again and all of my nervousness melted away. Jacinda and her stupid comments. Of course Dean and I were only friends. We always acted this way.

"You look nice," he said.

I glanced at my simple jeans, T-shirt and flip-flops. "Uh, thanks."

"Shall we?" He waved toward the buffet table.

Di was topping off the water pitchers at the end of the table. She eyed me curiously when Dean and I filled our plates.

Jacinda was another matter entirely. I swear she kept approaching our table just to torment me. She winked when I mouthed at her to *go away* and snickered when she walked back into the kitchen.

Dean took a bite of his steak. "How do you like your job here?"

"It's good. I mean, we all really like it."

"How long are you staying?"

"Hmm . . ." I cocked my head. Country music floated through the air. Snippets of conversation from the other tables drifted to us. I spoke louder as the din in the room grew. "I know we're employed until October. Not sure beyond that."

“You know . . .” He cleared his throat and set his utensils down. “They sometimes need help through the winter. Maybe you could stay on year round. We could spend the holidays together.”

I almost blew water through my nose. I hastily set my glass down and grabbed a napkin. Coughing vigorously, I wiped my face. Had he really just said we could spend our holidays together?

Dean clapped me on the back, a frown on his face. “You okay?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine,” I managed through the coughing.

Dean rubbed my back. The coughing had subsided, but Dean didn’t remove his hand. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

Heavy energy abruptly pulsed through the air. I stiffened. Dean still rubbed my back, oblivious to who just entered the room.

I didn’t have to look. I knew Flint just walked in. His energy was so strong it felt as if a hot ribbon wrapped around me and slid along my limbs. I inched away from Dean, but Dean’s hand stayed put.

“Do you want me to get you more water?” Dean’s hand moved down to rub my lower back.

“No. I’m good.”

I tried to inch away more, but it didn’t help. Dean just smiled as he softly rubbed my muscles. He started saying something else but stopped. I wasn’t listening anyway. Between Dean’s hand and Flint’s energy, my senses were overloaded.

Dean’s gaze trained on the door. I followed it. Sure enough, Flint stood by the door, staring at us.

I switched my vision. His orange and blue cloud pulsed and grew around him. It seemed to double in size every second. I hurriedly snapped my vision back to normal.

My breath sucked in when Flint strode toward us. His steps were purposeful and strong, his shoulders tensed, his hands fisted. My gaze dipped lower. His shoulders tapered to a toned waist that was as hard as the rest of him.

Desire flowed through my veins. It came out of nowhere. But seeing Flint like that, hot with rage, purposeful and strong, did something to me. It felt as if fire licked my insides. My hands gripped the table tightly.

My senses flooded with his nearness and scent. Spice, wood and tangerines. His scent only made me want him more. I tried to keep my voice even.

“Hi,” I said a little breathlessly when he stood beside our table.

“Hi.” He scowled at Dean before coming back to me. “Can I talk to you?”

I blinked. “Talk to me?”

“Yes.”

Dean stopped rubbing my back but didn’t remove his hand. “We’re kind of having dinner right now.”

“I’m aware of that,” Flint replied tightly.

“What do you want to talk about?” I asked.

“Can we go outside?” Irritation lined Flint’s words. His dark eyes bore into mine. For a fraction of a second, he let the curtain fall open. Deep emotion swirled in those inky irises. With a blink, it was gone.

Despite trying to control myself, I started to cave. I inched closer and wanted to soften into him, to wrap my arms around him. My heart ached to *be* with him, if only for a second.

All of sudden, I realized what I was doing. I abruptly straightened. I hated that I couldn’t control these emotions, especially when he so easily ignored me.

“No, not right now,” I replied.

“No?” His eyebrows shot up.

“Like Dean said, we’re having dinner. Can we talk later?”

The power off Flint soared. He gritted his teeth, turned and stalked away.

The rest of the dinner passed awkwardly. Flint sat at a table over from us. Hot energy pulsed toward me the entire time. Dean chatted away and acted as though Flint wasn’t there. Meanwhile, I squirmed and fidgeted. All I wanted was to run to Flint. I knew, however, that I’d look like a pathetic girl falling all over her first crush. Not to mention, Dean and I were having dinner. If I left, that would be rude.

When dinner finally ended, Dean smiled. “There’s another bonfire tonight. Want to go?”

Jacinda’s head whipped toward mine. She stood over twenty feet away, cleaning up the buffet, yet I knew she heard him. She was trying to hide a smile.

Between how Dean’s hand had lingered on my back and his now eager expression, the hundred percent certainty I’d felt that he and I were only friends dipped down to ninety percent.

“Um, I think Flint wanted to talk to me.”

Dean’s mouth tightened. He glanced toward Flint. Flint was currently attacking his steak. Literally. It was as though he thought the thing was still alive from how he stabbed it. The knife’s blade actually bent.

“Can’t you talk to him later?” Dean asked.

“Ah, I guess so.”

We stood, our chairs scraping loudly. I felt Flint’s gaze burn into my back on my walk out of the dining hall. Flint’s energy grew to an entirely new level. It was seriously making my head spin.

Outside, I took a few deep breaths as the world returned to normal. I didn’t understand how nobody else could feel what I did from Flint. Just now, it had been so strong, it felt like a living life force all on its own.

Oblivious to my turmoil, Dean smiled and reached down. His fingers brushed against mine.

I stuffed my hands into my pockets. *Make that eighty percent.*

“Um, I can’t stay out too long. I’m got to . . . um . . .” I released a hand from my pocket to pull at a curl.

Dean just smiled. “I’ll walk you home whenever you need to get back.”

Dean led me down the pavers that cut into the front lawn. When we reached the gravel, the wind picked up. His cologne wafted toward me again. Another grin spread across his face as we started to walk.

“We should go to the creek tomorrow on the horses,” Dean said. “There’s a nice picnic area there. Maybe we could pack a lunch.”

“Ah, I usually eat lunch in the kitchen while I’m working.”

“Oh.” His smile dimmed. “Maybe on your next day off.”

Guilt pummeled me as we walked to the bonfire. Had Jacinda been right? Did Dean like me more than a friend? I chewed my lip. I hated everything about this. Dean had only ever been nice to me. Why couldn’t I like him instead of Flint?

The smell of wood smoke filled the air the closer we got to the fire. It was also getting dark. I shivered as the temperature slowly dropped.

“Cold?” Dean asked.

I shook my head. “No, I’m fine.” I plastered a grin on my face. Dean was already unbuttoning his flannel. A crisp white T-shirt appeared underneath. “Really, I’m fine.”

“Oh, sure.” He re-buttoned the top.

The next thirty minutes passed entirely uncomfortably, completely opposite to how I'd initially felt at dinner. I didn't know if Dean wasn't taking the hint or if he thought awkward side steps and mumbled responses were the norm on "first dates." I groaned inwardly. How had I gotten myself into this?

I was about to throw myself into the fire when I felt him. I stiffened and almost dropped the stick I roasted marshmallows on.

Flint's energy pulsed toward me. My head whipped around. When I couldn't find him, I switched my vision. His cloud gave him away.

He stood off in the trees. A large oak almost hid him, but his shoulders were broad enough that it didn't hide him completely, and his pulsing orange and blue cloud glowed around him.

I snapped my sight back to normal. Since it was so dark, he blended into the night. If it weren't for his energy and glowing cloud, I'd have never known he was there.

"Um, I should probably turn in." I hastily stuffed the marshmallow in my mouth.

Dean straightened. "I'll walk you back."

I forced a smile. "I'll be fine. Really."

Dean frowned. It was the first doubt I'd seen flash across his face. "I'd feel better if I saw you home."

I remembered Di's order for none of us to walk alone at night. Besides, Dean deserved better than for me to ditch him at the fire.

"Okay, thanks." I smiled genuinely.

He perked up and placed his hand on my lower back. He kept it there until we returned to the gravel driveway.

The entire walk to my cabin I felt Flint follow. I didn't know who he thought he was fooling. He was silent. I'd give him that, but I swore I'd feel his energy a mile away. At least, when it was flowing this strong.

On my porch, I turned to Dean to tell him goodnight. His lips descended over mine and his arms encircled my waist before I knew what was happening. He pulled me closely to him, his soft lips molding to mine. I froze, stiffening in his arms like a board.

"Dean . . . I . . ." I jumped back, breaking our kiss and pulling free from his arms.

Flint was at my side in a second. "I think Lena's ready to turn in." Flint towered over me with fisted hands and tensed shoulders.

Dean hastily stepped back and blinked. The bewildered expression on his face made my guilt flow stronger.

“Flint?” Dean shook his head a few times, as if he wasn’t sure if he was seeing things. Dean glanced around. “Where the heck did you come from?”

The utter confusion in Dean’s voice made my eyes widen. I couldn’t believe Flint hadn’t been more careful about his speed.

“He was on the hill, coming down from the barn,” I said quickly.

“You were?” Dean asked.

“Yep, he was. Okay, then. I’m turning in. Night, guys!” I bolted through the cabin door and slammed it behind me before either of them could respond. Guilt made me cringe. It wasn’t the nicest way to end the night with Dean, but I wasn’t ready to face *that* conversation. Not yet at least.

Breathing heavily, I leaned against the door and sank to the floor. The hard wood pressed into my back, and the tiled entryway chilled my thighs. I didn’t care. All I knew was that I needed some time to figure out what the hell just happened.

Since it was dark and quiet in the cabin, I knew Jacinda and Di were still working. I didn’t know where Mica was. Even though I usually preferred to be surrounded by people, at that moment, I was glad to be alone.

“What the hell was that?” I finally muttered. I was about to stand when I felt it again. Flint’s energy. It came from *behind* the cabin. It was so strong I felt it through the wall.

Wide-eyed, I stood and opened the door. Cool evening air swirled into the cabin. Moonlight illuminated the porch.

With hesitant movements, I peeked out. Dean was gone, thankfully. I didn’t see anyone else. Shivering, I crossed my arms and walked quietly down the porch and around the side of the cabin.

Tall grass brushed against my legs. When I rounded the back corner, sure enough, Flint sat in the grass, aggressively pulling petals off some wildflower.

“Flint?” I said.

He bolted to standing. “Lena?” Tousled hair covered his head, as if he’d run his fingers through it repeatedly. “What are you doing here?”

I balked. “What am *I* doing here? Uh, I live here.”

He dropped the flower and raked a hand through his hair. “Oh. Right.”

“What are *you* doing here?”

He looked down and shuffled his feet. The movement was entirely bizarre. I’d never seen Flint as anything but calm and cool. This was a complete one-eighty.

“I . . . ah . . .” he stammered. He didn’t continue.

I raised my eyebrows. “You what?”

He stuffed his hands into his pockets and shrugged. A confused expression crossed his face. “I don’t know.”

I shivered in the cool night. His head snapped up. “Are you cold?”

“A little.”

In a move so fast he was a blur, he stood beside me and was putting his jacket around my shoulders. The warm fabric fell around me before I could protest. In the next second, a cloud of spice, wood and tangerines wafted up to greet me. My head spun.

In just a T-shirt and jeans, he shoved his hands back into his pockets. Strong, muscled forearms peeked out. A rush of desire shot through me again. As before, it took me completely by surprise.

“What did you want to talk about in the dining room?” I asked. Hot, raw energy flowed out of him again. My pulse quickened.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?” I cocked an eyebrow.

He glanced away and ran a hand through his hair again. “It was just . . .” he made a noise in his throat, like a frustrated growl. “*Dammit.”* He seethed.

His frustration took me completely by surprise. “Is everything okay?”

He laughed humorlessly. “Oh yeah, everything’s fine.”

When I raised my eyebrows, he took a deep breath, as though it pained him to continue. “I don’t know why I came up to you like that. I’m sorry.”

“So . . . you didn’t have anything you wanted to talk about?”

His dark gaze had that deep emotion in it again. In the moonlight, it practically swirled. Except this time, it didn’t go away. “No, not really. I saw you sitting there with Dean. He was touching you, and I don’t know . . . I kind of . . .”

The silence stretched.

“You kind of what?”

“I kind of lost it,” he said quietly.

I waited for him to explain, but he didn’t.

“What does that mean?”

He raked a hand through his hair again. This time, he kept his gaze averted. “I wanted to get you away from him and telling you that I needed to talk to you outside was what I came up with.”

That admission left me speechless.

Flint ran a hand through his hair *again*. It was practically standing up straight by now. I’d never seen him so unsure or embarrassed before.

“Oh, um, okay . . .” I murmured.

“So yeah . . .” He turned and took a step back. Raw energy still poured from him. It took me a second before I realized he was about to walk away.

“Wait!” I called.

He stopped dead in his tracks. Pushing a strand of hair behind my ear, I waited until he turned to face me. “I don’t get it,” I said.

His shoulders tensed.

I tentatively put a hand on his forearm. His muscles bunched, and his heat seared my skin. Another rush of desire, so strong it made my knees weak, shot through me. “So . . . you don’t want me seeing Dean?”

He gritted his teeth. “No. I guess I don’t.”

“Why?”

He shook his head but didn’t say anything.

“Flint. Please tell me what’s going on.”

He raked a hand through his hair again. “I don’t know.” He sighed harshly. “It’s just . . .” His silence stretched.

“Just what?”

He refused to meet my gaze. “That first day when we picked you up . . . something . . . changed in me when I saw you.”

For a moment all I could do was breathe shallowly. I still had my hand on his arm. I was acutely aware of his hot, smooth skin. “Is that why you ignored me when I got in the Suburban?”

He gave the barest hint of a nod.

“And that’s why you barely speak to me, unless you have to?”

Another slight nod.

“Right.” I dropped my hand and gazed out over the pastures. I couldn’t think when I touched him. Nighttime sounds drifted to us: crickets, the wind, a distant vehicle on the county road.

“I should probably go,” he said.

My stomach sank. “Don’t.”

He tensed again.

“Talk to me. Don’t leave like this.”

He was about to reach his hand to his hair when I grabbed it. Energy exploded off him. “Whoa,” I murmured. “You have no idea what’s coming off you right now.”

“What do you mean?”

“Your cloud is so strong. I can *feel* it. You’re the only person I can feel like that.”

“Really?”

“I could feel you at the fire, when you were hiding behind that tree, and I felt when you followed Dean and me back here. I knew you were there.”

Flint groaned quietly. “Well, shit, that’s embarrassing.”

I laughed. I couldn’t help it. Once again, I’d never seen him so unsure and I swear he just blushed.

“It makes me feel better when I can feel you,” I admitted.

“It does?”

“Yeah, you’re not the only one who felt something when we met. I . . . ah . . . got a feeling off you too.”

“What kind of feeling?”

“When I first saw you, something came over me . . . I felt . . . safe. Like you’d never let anyone hurt me.”

“I wouldn’t.”

“I know.”

The silence stretched again. I let go of his hand even though I loved how it felt. Taking a deep breath, I finally got the courage to ask him something I’d been wondering all day. “Did you really spend last night outside our cabin?”

His forehead furrowed. “How’d you know that?”

“Jacinda.”

He snorted. “Figures.”

“She thought you were keeping watch—over me.”

He didn’t respond.

“Were you?”

“Yes.”

“You mean you weren’t concerned for *everyone’s* safety?”

He smiled humorlessly. “I suppose I should have been. But no, if you want the honest answer, I was only worried about you.”

“What about Di? Isn’t she your . . . girlfriend . . . or whatever?”

Flint’s eyes widened. His mouth actually dropped. “Di? My *girlfriend?”*

I squirmed. “I just thought . . . I mean I wasn’t sure since you two always hang out together.”

“That doesn’t mean she’s my girlfriend. Lena, I think Di’s my *sister*.”

Now it was my turn to look stunned. “Your sister?”

“Haven’t you noticed how similar we are? We’re both tall, have dark eyes and olive skin. Even our personalities are similar. Both natural leaders, keep to ourselves, don’t always get along with others.”

“Um, now that you mention it.” A warm rush of relief washed over me.

He chuckled. We stood staring at one another for a moment. I was acutely aware of every second. Finally, he grunted, “So are you dating Dean?”

“No.”

His energy noticeably subsided. “Good. Keep it that way.”

The possessive tone in his voice surprised me. I wanted to ask him *why* he didn’t want me dating Dean, but then I heard voices. Footsteps on gravel accompanied the voices and then the thump of people climbing the porch.

“Di and Jacinda are back,” Flint said. A breeze ruffled his thoroughly mussed hair. I wanted to reach up and smooth it. I barely stopped my fingers.

“Yeah, I hear.”

“It’s late. We should probably turn in.”

Disappointment swelled in me. I cleared my throat. “Yeah, of course.”

We walked to the front of the cabin. Our arms brushed each other’s. The slight contact sent desire racing through me again. My body’s reaction to him bordered on crazy.

At the bottom of the porch steps, he turned to face me. The porch light illuminated his dark eyes and that deep emotion that still swirled in them. He wasn’t shielding anything right now. His energy had also picked up again, but it was more controlled, like soft waves instead of the fierce power it had been earlier.

“What are you doing tomorrow night after work?” he asked.

His eyes and scent made my head swim. “Um, nothing, I don’t think.”

“Do you want to go somewhere with me? Just the two of us?”

I stopped breathing. “Yes.”

He smiled, a small crooked smile that looked sexy as hell. “I’ll see you then.”

And with that, he was gone.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The next morning, I woke early and lay in bed going over every detail from the night before.

Flint didn't want me dating Dean. He'd actually admitted that.

I turned on my side and stared at the wall. A sheetrock screw had popped. I picked at it and snuggled deeper under the warm covers.

Flint had also *followed* me from the dining room to the bonfire. After that, he'd raced to my side when Dean kissed me. He'd been angry at the thought of me with Dean. That poor wildflower had taken the brunt of his aggression.

I muffled a giggle and smiled into my pillow.

By the time I got up, I had to scramble. Scents of brewing coffee wafted into the room. I knew Di was at the kitchenette.

The blow dryer sounded in the bathroom. Jacinda was probably putting the finishing touches on her hair.

As for me, I threw on the first thing I picked up: jeans and a T-shirt. I almost fell over as I hurriedly stuffed my legs into the pants.

"Lena!" Di called from the living room. "Get moving. We gotta go!"

That's right. It was Val's day off today so all three of us were working. "Coming!" I tried to call quietly.

Mica grumbled in her sleep and buried her head under her covers. I nearly tripped trying to get out of the room. Mica was as messy as me. Our stuff lay everywhere.

When Di, Jacinda and I finally walked out the front door, the last thing I expected was what greeted us on the porch.

Flint sat on the swing.

One foot rocked the swing, while the other sat idle. He was staring at the sunrise, but his gaze honed onto me as soon as I passed through the door.

I could tell his presence took all of us by surprise, although Di tried to act perfectly normal as she turned to lock the door. However, Jacinda and I

both stared, wide-eyed.

When my brain actually worked enough to do something, I looked out across the ranch. I didn't know what else to do. Flint waited on our porch, but why? The sun burned on the horizon, the breeze cool. A blur of movement swirled the air at my side.

Flint stood beside me.

Startled, I anxiously assessed our surroundings, wondering if anyone had seen him move that fast. No one else was out.

It always seemed Flint knew when he could and couldn't move at his speed. The times he did, not a soul could be seen. Well, except for last night, when he'd been unable to control himself after Dean kissed me. I smiled inwardly.

Flint's scent flowed like a soft caress across my skin. I resisted the urge to close my eyes and inhale. Peeking up at him, I mumbled, "Hello."

His response was to clasp my hand and pull me toward the steps. My heart stopped. It was only then I remembered we weren't alone. Di and Jacinda both watched, mouths agape.

"Coming?" Flint called.

They kicked into action, and we all began walking toward the main house. Nobody said a thing. *This is definitely going to be an awkward five minutes.*

Jacinda finally broke the ice a few steps later. "Nice morning, don't you think?"

"Pretty sunrise," Di commented.

"Yeah, lots of colors," Jacinda said.

Flint's fingers curled around mine. They felt hard, calloused, and warm. I couldn't manage a reply to the sunrise conversation.

Flint, of course, remained silent.

Di and Jacinda eyed each other and took a big step forward, then another. Slowly, they moved farther and farther ahead.

"Did you sleep okay?" Flint asked when we fell behind. Our arms brushed each other's. That small sensation sent tingles along my nerves. He was still holding my hand.

"Um, yeah, fine. You?" I replied.

"Really good."

I swallowed self-consciously. "Well . . . it probably helps that you didn't slink around our cabin all night."

He smiled. “I might have gotten up a few times to check on you.”

My eyes shot to his. From the teasing glint in his gaze, I couldn’t tell if he was serious or not.

When we arrived at the main house, he stopped and faced me. I held my breath, unsure of what he would do.

Another crooked smile greeted me. “Have a good day.”

I tried to reply. All that came out was an unintelligible sound.

“See you tonight,” he added. “I’ll pick you up at nine.” With that, he turned and walked away.

I SPENT THE entire day watching the clock. The morning crawled by, the afternoon not much better. Since things ended awkwardly with Dean the previous night, I didn’t go to the barn on my break. I felt guilty about that. I knew sooner or later I’d have to face him, to try to smooth things over, but today wasn’t that day.

Consequently, I paced the cabin for the entire four hours in the afternoon. My nerves didn’t abate one bit when we went back to work at supper.

By the time eight o’clock finally rolled around, I was so anxious I ran back to the cabin. Given I still had an hour until Flint arrived, I had enough time to mull over what to wear. Of course, Jacinda approved whole-heartedly.

With her help, I chose fitted jeans and a green sweater that matched my eyes. Since I figured we’d be somewhere on the ranch, I anticipated being outside. Mica suggested I tie my hair up in case it got windy. I hesitated. Fingering my curls would give my hands something to do.

“I think I’ll keep it down,” I replied.

Mica shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

“What about shoes?” I asked.

“Definitely hiking boots.” Mica lounged on her bottom bunk. “Then you’re ready for anything.”

Jacinda snorted. “Hiking boots? No.” She rummaged through my closet and pulled out my lone pair of heels. “These would look great with skinny jeans, but we may need to change your top . . .” She bit her lip.

I snatched the hiking boots off the floor. “These will do!”

Running from the room, I escaped to the couch. Di merely raised an eyebrow when I plopped next to her.

Her book, *Amnesia—The Mystery behind the Secrets Within,* was visible from where I sat. I was pretty sure Di had raided the entire medical section in Little Raven's small public library. Last week, she'd been reading, *The Science of Memory.*

I hurriedly pulled my boots on. I was about to ask Di if she'd discovered anything to explain our memory loss when a knock rapped on the front door. All of the blood drained from my face. My gaze flew to the clock. I gulped.

Nine o'clock had arrived.

My heart pounded as I walked to the door. Out of my peripheral vision, I saw Jacinda and Mica take my place on the couch, which of course, gave them an unobstructed view of the front door. I cast them an irritated look. Mica merely grinned.

"Well, don't keep him waiting!" she called.

Taking a deep breath, I opened the door. The second my eyes met Flint's, I stopped breathing. He lounged casually against the door frame and smelled freshly showered. That mix of spice, wood and tangerines wafted toward me. His chestnut hair curled at the ends, still slightly damp. A clean, flannel button-up shirt stretched across his broad chest. Worn jeans hugged his lean hips, and an old tattered, wool blanket was tucked under one arm.

He stood at the threshold, not coming in. Instead, he held out his hand.

It took me a moment to understand I was supposed to take it. I was glad my back blocked my shaking fingers from view.

"Ready?" Flint asked.

"Bye!" I called over my shoulder.

Flint pulled me onto the porch. Just as the door closed, Mica yelled, "Have fun!"

A few muffled laughs followed. I gritted my teeth and tried to stop the nervousness that churned my stomach. My free hand was already pulling a curl.

The porch creaked as we walked to the steps.

"Where are we going?" I was glad I'd worn a sweater. A chilly breeze flowed in the air.

"You'll see."

We hopped down the stairs and walked toward the upper barn. A few stars appeared amidst the wispy clouds. The air smelled fresh, scents of grass and milkweed on the breeze.

Our feet tramped softly on the gravel. I wondered if we were going for a ride. I'd never done an evening horseback ride before, but just as we reached the big hill to the upper barn, Flint propelled me farther to the left.

"I was thinking we could go to this place I found," he said.

Night sounds drifted in the breeze. I tucked a strand of hair behind my ear. "Um, sure. What place?"

"It's a few miles from here."

Good thing I wore the hiking boots. "Sure, this way?" I angled my head to the left.

I was about to start walking when Flint reached out. His hand closed over my forearm. Tingles immediately raced along my arm.

"It will probably take an hour to walk there. It would be faster if I carried you. May I?"

I had no idea what he was asking so just nodded. Before I could blink, the air rushed around me and the next thing I knew, I was astride his back, piggyback style.

"Whoa," I managed at the sudden movement.

"Can you hold this?" He handed me the blanket.

"Ah, okay." I placed it between us.

"Hold on." He wrapped my legs securely around his waist, and a second later, we were flying.

I wrapped my arms tightly around his chest. His arms pumped at his sides. In no time, we were in the forest.

I had no idea any human could move so fast. The night air flew by. Cool, fresh air burst across my face.

Surprisingly, riding on Flint's back was smooth, even when he leaped over logs or darted around trees. His joints scissored liked well-oiled hinges, his legs strong as steel. Steady breaths rushed in and out of his lungs. The incredible speed at which he ran seemed to barely affect him.

It couldn't have been more than five minutes before we came to an abrupt halt. The jolting stop almost pitched me over his shoulders. Luckily, he had my legs gripped tightly around him.

Carefully, Flint set me down in a large clearing.

"Where are we?" My legs wobbled for a moment.

He reached out to steady me before taking the blanket and spreading it across the tall grass. "About three miles west. Near the ranch's perimeter."

After the blanket was fully settled, he sat down. The fast run hadn't fazed him. Sweat didn't line his face. Harsh breaths didn't raise his chest. Flint held out his hand. "Care to join me?"

I tried to nod but couldn't breathe. How had he run that fast with me? And *how* could he seem so relaxed and confident when it felt as if my stomach would flip right over?

The picture he painted sitting on the blanket with his hand outstretched made my head spin. It seemed the cool, confident Flint I knew was back, as though the nervous, unsure one from the night before never existed.

"Lena?" he asked in that deep tone of his.

"Right, sorry." The instant my hand joined his, I was lying on the ground beside him. He'd moved like lightning again, picking me up and laying me beside him, as if I weighed no more than a jar of Val's pickled green beans.

"Wow," I muttered. "It's a good thing I don't get motion sickness."

His eyes widened. "Sorry."

"It's okay."

As my eyes adjusted to the dark sky, the silence stretched. I played with my hair again. Flint lay only inches away. I felt his gaze on me.

"Um, so . . . how was your day?" I asked.

"Good. Just the usual, mending fences, moving cattle. You?"

"Yeah, good too. Same as you really, just the usual." I stumbled over the words and wanted to kick myself. I bet Jacinda hadn't batted an eye on her first date with Huxley. I wished I could be more like her.

Flint was watching me with a smile on his face. Once again, the curtain draped wide open, deep emotion glinting in his irises.

"What?" I raised a hand to straighten my hair. Were snarls flying all over?

"Nothing, just you."

"Just me, what?"

His lips tugged up more. He shook his head. "You just have this way about you. One minute you've got a smart comment on the tip of your tongue, but the next you're nervous about your hair, or carrying on some silent conversation with yourself."

I made a face. "How do you know that?"

"Your expression changes. I can only imagine what you're thinking."

My eyes widened. "Oh, well . . ."

“I like that about you.” He smiled—a real smile that completely transformed his face. His teeth flashed white, and he looked so unbelievably sexy that I stopped breathing. I had to look away. It was doing my head in.

“So . . .” I kept my gaze on the meadow that dipped down in front of us. “Can I ask you something?”

“Yes.”

“Is . . . uh . . . is this a date?”

A few seconds passed. “Do you want it to be?”

Yes. The thought came immediately. I didn’t have the guts to say it, though. But the things he’d said last night . . .

“Tell me,” he whispered.

The word flowed out of me before I could stop it. “Yes.”

He seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. “Good, because that’s what I want too.”

His face lay only inches from mine. I hastily glanced away and thought about that first moment we met, the way we both reacted to each other. More than anything, I was certain I’d once known him. It was as if my body remembered what my mind could not.

Flint reached up and traced a finger across my cheek. The touch seared my skin, like a fire blazing a trail. “I want to know you better.”

“What do you want to know?”

His eyebrows drew together. I thought he mumbled *everything*. “What kind of books do you like? Have you ever seen a movie? What do you do when you’re not working? How do you like living on the ranch? Who’s your favorite in the group? Do you—”

I held up a hand. “Hold on. Do you want me to answer all of those questions?”

“Yes.”

I smiled. “Okay, one at a time then.”

He shook his head. “Sorry. I feel like I’ve wasted so much time with you.”

“Well, we’ve got plenty of time now.”

“Do we?” His eyes darkened in the moonlight. I was about to ask him what he meant, when he said, “You’re right. Of course, you’re right. Why wouldn’t we?”

Somehow, I managed to shake off that uneasy comment.

“So?” he said. “Are you going to answer my questions?”

I bit my lip to keep from grinning. “Okay, well, I’ve only read a few books since that first morning, but I like to read mysteries. And while I seem to know when people are referring to movie quotes, or talking about an actor, I don’t actually remember any movies from . . . before. The only movie I’ve seen in the past five months is *Ghostbusters*.”

Flint raised an eyebrow.

“A couple I hitchhiked with put me in the back with their kids. They had a DVD player. It was a good movie, but I think I was more amazed that I recognized some actor’s faces. I mean, how could I do that, if I couldn’t remember anything about myself?”

“It’s like that for all of us.”

That statement reminded me how unusual our circumstance was. The titles from Di’s books flashed through my mind. Nothing about us, how we met, who we were, or what we could do, was normal. And none of us knew why.

“The not knowing drives me crazy,” I said quietly. “And nobody will talk to me about it. Except Jet, and I’m not sure I want to talk to *him* about it.”

“I take it you’ve heard his conspiracy theories that we’re all aliens reincarnated?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

I caught his smile before his tone turned serious. “You can talk to me if you want.”

“Really? I didn’t think I could. That one time I went with you and Di to the library, I felt like a third wheel.”

He sighed. “I know. I’m sorry for how I acted. I was trying to ignore you so I wouldn’t have to address the emotions clawing up my insides.”

Emotions clawing up his insides? I ducked to hide a smile. “Do you ever think we’ll find answers?”

“I hope so. Di and I still spend most of our free time combing the internet, searching for articles throughout the country about missing people and hunting for any clue that could help identify us.”

“I’m guessing you haven’t found anything?”

Flint shook his head. “Not yet.”

“But you have an idea about our tattoos?” I still remembered what he’d said that day almost three weeks ago when Jacinda and I went shopping.

“Yes.” He picked up my wrist. His large finger traced my tattoo. I wanted to close my eyes as tingles ran up my arm, but his next word snapped me out of it. “Earth.”

I shook my head. “What? Earth? What does that mean?”

He held up his wrist. The circle with the arrow attached to it was barely visibly in the moonlight. “Mars.”

It clicked. “They’re planetary symbols.”

“So far, yes. All of them are. We’ll have to see what the new girl’s tattoo is, but I bet money it’s Mercury. It’s the only symbol left.”

“What the heck. What does that mean?”

“We don’t know.”

I bit my lip. When I thought about it, *really* thought about it, I wanted to scream in frustration. But it was more than that. It wasn’t only frustrating, it was frightening too. I remembered what Jet said, that day the group told me who they were. *A bad omen*. He was probably right. Someone, somewhere knew who we were. And someone tattooed us with these symbols, but why?

“Hey.” Flint nudged me.

I met his gaze. Worry flashed across his face.

“Sorry,” I mumbled. “It’s just . . .” I paused. “It’s scary.”

He inched closer to me. “What about your free time? What do you like to do?”

I knew he was trying to distract me. The energy that always flowed around him picked up, probably from worry. Perhaps it wasn’t only anger that made it peak.

“Um, well . . .” I shook myself mentally. He was right to change the subject. Getting wrapped up in fears about our beginnings wasn’t how I wanted to spend our first date. We had plenty of time for doom and gloom later. “When I’m not working, I’m at the barn with Dean, which is pretty much every day.”

His energy increased more. “Hmm, Dean again.”

The possessiveness of his tone sent shivers through me. However, he didn’t give me a chance to recover before he launched into more questions.

For the next hour, I told him everything he wanted to know. All of the cities I’d hitchhiked to, which guests had made the biggest impressions on me, what my favorite foods were, who I liked hanging out with most in the

group, what kind of music I enjoyed, if I was a morning person versus a night person . . . the list went on.

He seemed endlessly curious and asked me more and more questions. It warmed me considerably, since I guessed when it came to other people, Flint was not a curious person.

“Okay, my turn,” I said after a while. “You won’t let me get more than a sentence or two in.”

“Sorry.” He shook his head. His hair ruffled in the breeze. I wanted to touch a strand that fell across his forehead. Instead, I eyed the small distance between us. Only inches separated us.

“What did you want to ask me?” His tone grew deeper.

I cleared my throat. “Tell me about *you*. You know so much about me, but I know next to nothing about you.”

“What do you want to know?”

“Well . . .” I chewed my lip. “How about where you woke up, wasn’t it somewhere unusual?”

“Yeah, I woke up in Yellowstone National Park.”

“What?”

He chuckled. “I’m not lying. I swear.”

“Beside a geyser or something?”

“Not quite that interesting. I’d slept in a cabin in the park, but it wasn’t a luxury condo like everyone else.”

“But you still had the money and IDs.” I thought again about our strange situation. I couldn’t help it. A chill ran through me. “I wonder who set this all up, and why.”

“Your guess is as good as mine.”

I gazed into his dark eyes. The moonlight dipped his face into shadows. “Does everyone *ever* talk about it? As an entire group? About what happened to us?”

“Initially, yes, it was all we could talk about for weeks. You have to remember that some of us had been here for months before you arrived. During that time, we combed this area, searching for what drew us here. None of us could find anything. But as you may have noticed, some in the group find it too upsetting to talk about, so now it’s just Di and me pursuing answers.” He paused. “Di’s still convinced we’ll find answers eventually. Maybe here, maybe somewhere else. She sees us leaving, as you know, so as soon as the new girl arrives, we’ll figure out what to do next.”

“What do you mean, *do next?* Like go somewhere?”

“Exactly.”

“Where would we go?” The John Hancock building flashed through my mind.

“If Di can’t give us an exact location, we’ll decide as a group at our next meeting where to go. We always have group meetings before we pick up a new person. That started after we found Jacinda, and anytime we make a big decision in those meetings, there’s only one rule.”

“Which is?”

“We all have to be in agreement when we make decisions. If someone thinks we should go somewhere or do something, it has to be a unanimous vote. It’s either all-in or it doesn’t happen.”

I lay back down. The scratchy wool blanket tickled my ear as a stray curl flew over my face. Flint reached up and tucked it behind my ear. His finger lingered a second longer than necessary. That little intimate gesture made me lose all train of thought.

For a moment, I just lay there, studying him. Fire once again grew in my veins as I memorized his broad shoulders and muscled arms. I mentally slapped myself. “Um, so why does it have to be unanimous? Why not majority rules?”

“We decided early on that everyone needs to be okay with what’s being asked of them. Control isn’t something we have much of.”

“Oh.” I gazed at the sky so I could actually concentrate on the conversation. Watching Flint didn’t allow that. “I guess that makes sense. Those first few months I felt completely out of control. The instinct, or pull or whatever you want to call it, pushed me for so many weeks. I felt like a drug-addict, too helpless to resist it. I wanted so desperately to know what happened to me.”

Flint’s heat and that energy that always surrounded him picked up again. I kept my gaze on the sky. Stars shone brightly above. Out of habit, I reached up and slowly traced a constellation.

“What are you doing?” Flint asked, a smile in his voice.

“Nothing.” I dropped my hand.

He inched closer and reached down. He took my hand into his. My breath stopped when he lifted my arm back up. Cupping my palm, he stretched out my finger beside his and together we began tracing patterns in the sky.

“Polaris which traces into Ursa Minor,” he murmured, guiding my hand.

“And sits above Ursa Major.” I moved his arm.

He trailed our fingers along the stars. “Draco . . . Hercules . . . Serpens . . .”

“Caput . . . Ophiuchus . . .”

One by one, we named the summer constellations.

“You know them too,” I whispered when we finished.

“Sometimes at night, I’ll come out here to find the constellations. I didn’t know you enjoyed backyard astronomy.”

“I’ve always liked it, at least, what I can remember of it. Since I slept outside every night, before I met all of you, I spent a lot of time staring at the sky.”

His energy picked up again. He cursed and raked a hand through his hair. “I hate thinking of you out there by yourself with nothing.”

It took me a moment to calm my breathing. His energy still flowed full-force. “Um, I was fine. Really.”

“That was pure luck you were fine,” he muttered. “What if some guy found you asleep on the ground?”

“I’m not completely helpless.”

He sighed. “I know. I know. I just mean . . .” he paused and sighed again. “You’re a woman, and you’re so small. What if that guy didn’t have honorable intentions? Then what?”

I muffled a smile that he’d actually said *honorable intentions*. “Well, that never happened. Most nights I slept off roads and highways in the ditch. Nobody knew I was there.”

He muttered a sound. “And *that’s* safe?”

I shrugged.

“What about the rides you took? What if one of those guys raped you or hurt you?” he demanded.

A memory flashed through my mind, of a guy with the dark cloud who had chased me in Arizona. Flint had a point. Those thoughts had plagued me too, but I also knew I had an advantage.

“I’m a pretty good judge of character. You know, that internal radar thing?” I tapped my head. “My clouds have never been wrong. At least, not that I know of.” I briefly thought about Aaron and his ugly, black cloud. I hadn’t seen him all week. I only hoped it stayed that way.

Flint traced a finger along my cheek, and I shivered. His eyes darkened even more. “Despite your radar, I never want you doing that again.”

“I don’t intend to.”

His finger stayed on my skin, tracing a line down my neck. Heat pooled in my core. I squirmed. “Um, I still don’t know much about you.”

“What do you want to know?” he asked softly.

“Well, what about what you asked me? Favorite food? Music? Who you like hanging out with the most? Morning versus night person?” I trailed off.

He cleared his throat and dropped his hand. “I’ll eat mostly anything, but I do seem to be a meat and potato guy. My favorite music is rock, but I’ve grown used to the country Val and Pete prefer. Until now, my favorite person to hang out with was Di, and I’m a morning person. I’m usually the first awake in my cabin.”

I raised an eyebrow. “Di *was* your favorite? Who’s your favorite now?”

“You.” His tone implied that answer should have been obvious.

“Even though Di’s your sister?”

“Even though she’s my sister.”

Warmth slid through me that had nothing to do with his body heat. I leaned back again. “So, Jet and Jasper are brothers, and you and Di are siblings,” I said more to myself than him.

“We think we are,” Flint added. “We don’t have proof.”

“You could get a DNA test.”

He shook his head. “No tests.”

“Why not?”

“Because we don’t know why we’re like this.”

“What do you mean?”

“You know, our abilities or gifts or whatever. We’re all different, and we don’t know why that is. What if internally, we’re different too? Different blood work or different DNA? What do you think would happen if someone ran those tests and discovered that?”

I swallowed uneasily. “They’d probably want to do more tests.”

“Exactly, so no tests, and no hospitals either, for the same reason.”

His comments reminded me that there were still a lot of unanswered questions. Things we may never know.

“Do you think it’s possible that I have a sibling?” I asked. “If you and Di are related, and we know Jet and Jasper are definitely related, then maybe I have a brother or sister?”

I didn’t know why, but the innate need to find my family was so strong. Initially, it was what I thought I’d find in Little Raven. For months, I thought the instinct was my subconscious leading me home. And then, when I’d had that reaction to Little Raven, I thought all I needed to do was find someone who recognized me and they’d tell me where I lived. Of course, all I’d ended up doing was scaring the locals and making a name for myself in town—not a good name.

“Do you think it’s possible?” I knew my eyes were pleading. “Maybe this new girl? Maybe she’s my sister?”

Flint’s voice softened. “I suppose she could be.”

For a moment, I just stared at him, hope welling in my chest.

He abruptly leaned forward and pressed his lips into mine. He kissed me softly, fire burning in his touch. I felt his need, his desire and it took me so completely by surprise, I tensed.

He pulled back. “Sorry. It’s just that look on your face . . .”

“Don’t go,” I whispered.

He didn’t need encouragement. In one of his incredibly fast moves, he pulled me to him. He trapped me in his arms, pinning me to the ground. I wrapped my arms around him, my fingers threading through his hair.

I had no idea how many times I’d been kissed, but I didn’t care. Any thought of whether or not I was doing it right, vanished. Flint’s taste commanded all of my attention. My body felt alive under his. Tingles and heat raced through me. The energy off him exploded. Feeling his need only fueled my own.

After I don’t know how long, Flint finally pulled back. It was then I became aware of a rock-hard bulge pressing into my thigh. “We need to stop, Lena.” His breath came out in harsh pants.

I could only nod.

He let go and rolled off. Wrapping my arms around myself, I shivered. The night air felt so cold.

“Cold?” The concern in his tone made me smile. Being cold was something I’d grown used to. Sleeping outside wasn’t exactly comfortable, and so far, being a little cold had never hurt me.

“I’m okay.”

He grunted. “Right and I’m the King of England. You’re shivering.”

Before I could reply, he pulled me to him again. Snuggled up beside him, his heat flowed over me.

“How is it that you’re so warm?” I reveled in his tight, possessive embrace.

“Fast metabolism.”

“Mmm,” I murmured. I laid a hand on his chest.

His breath sucked in. “You have no idea what you do to me,” he growled.

He clasped my hand and brought it safely between both of his. He thumbed my tattoo while he stared up at the night sky.

I watched him as he gazed at the stars. The feel and smell of him created a hot, heady feeling in me. My core still ached and yearned for more, but I knew now wasn’t the right time.

Snuggling closer, I heard his heart beat strongly within. The sound, smell and feel of him so closely against me stirred something deep in my mind. I felt it happen. Like a book cover that cracked, revealing a deep, intricate story that promised to captivate. I knew without a doubt that something dormant inside me, buried deep within my subconscious, had come back to life.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

We lay on the blanket until the wee hours of the morning. It was only when I started to nod off to sleep that Flint gently picked me up.

"I should get you back," he said.

I murmured something halfway intelligible. I knew I was somewhere between asleep and awake but couldn't rouse myself completely. The feel of his arms around me, his scent, and that ever present feeling of safety beckoned me to sleep.

Rustling sounded and then the scratchy, wool blanket covered me. It tickled my face. I merely snuggled closer to him as he began to walk.

I must have truly fallen asleep on the way back to the cabin. The next thing I knew, Flint was laying me on my top bunk. Soft snores from Mica filled the room.

"Night, babe," he whispered.

Soft lips pressed into mine. I moaned and leaned closer. He took a deep breath and firmly, yet gently, pushed me back. A second later, a door closed.

I woke to the smell of coffee and the sound of a distant shower. Groggily, I opened my eyes and sat up. My bedroom appeared around me.

Rubbing my eyes, I tried to remember returning with Flint. It was hazy, like a dream that disappeared upon waking. The sights, smells and memory of it vanished. Only a good feeling lingered. It made me want to snuggle under my covers and try desperately to hold onto it.

"Well, good morning, Sunshine," a voice called.

My eyes snapped wide open. I peered below. Mica lay on her bed, awake. She grinned brightly. "Have fun on your *date*, last night?"

I rolled my eyes and threw my pillow at her.

She dodged the blow. "Hey, just asking. You were out pretty late. It's only natural to be curious."

I yawned and stretched.

"Gonna tell me about it?" she asked.

I pictured Flint's broad shoulders, strong chest and how he'd felt and tasted. A wave of possessiveness rolled through me. I didn't want to share that with anyone.

"Nope."

Mica made a noise that sounded very similar to an audible pout. "I'd tell you if Jasper kissed me."

"Jasper kissed you?"

"Well . . . no, but if he did, I'd tell you."

I jumped down from my bunk. Sounds came from the living room. Di and Jacinda were talking. It was probably time to get going. All three of us were working again today. Like yesterday, Val had the day off.

"Hmm, well that's nice," I said.

Mica harrumphed. "Fine, don't tell me."

When Di, Jacinda and I walked to work, Jacinda's gaze looked very similar to Mica's. "You're certainly in a good mood."

It was only then that I became aware of the ridiculous grin on my face. "What do you mean?"

She winked. "I think you know what I mean."

I rolled my eyes but kept grinning.

"What did you two do last night?" she asked.

A door banged. One of the guests stepped onto his porch, a steaming mug in his hand. I smiled and waved. He waved back.

"Are you going to tell me?" Jacinda asked.

"Tell you what?" I asked sweetly.

She sighed and smoothed her perfectly ironed shirt. "All right, all right. I'll stop asking."

"Oh!" Di abruptly fell to the ground. Both Jacinda and I careened to a stop. I winced when the sound of gravel crunched into Di's knees.

For a moment, Jacinda and I just stood there, but then Jacinda kicked into action and rushed to Di's side.

She kneeled beside her as Di panted quietly. Alarm raced through me. "Should I get help?"

Down the drive, the guest on his porch stood from the porch swing. He made a move like he was going to run to us.

Di shook her head, panting quietly. "No, no, I'm fine. It was just a vision, but a strong one. She's coming. *Tomorrow!*"

I waved the guest back. “She’s fine!” I yelled. “Just tripped!” The guest sat back down.

Jacinda and I helped Di to her feet. *She’s coming*. That only meant one thing. The new girl.

“So you’re not hurt?” I asked. The knee in Di’s black pants had ripped. A smear of blood trailed along the fabric.

Di shook her head furiously. She winced when she fully straightened her leg. “No. It’s just . . . that vision was powerful.” Di’s face was practically white as she rubbed gravel and dirt from her pants. “She just changed course. She’ll arrive in Colorado tomorrow. I’m sure of it. I saw a plane. She’s on it.”

“Does that mean she’s flying into Little Raven?” Jacinda asked.

Di shook her head and fingered her temples again. “I don’t know. Maybe. Or maybe not.” She groaned. “I hate when my visions are like this. So strong but still cloudy. It’s incredibly frustrating.”

It was the most I’d ever heard Di talk about her gift. Laying a hand on her arm, I said, “Don’t worry. We’ll find her.”

Di smiled weakly. “We better get to work. We’ll have a meeting to discuss it tonight.”

Jacinda and I flanked Di’s sides and held onto her. Di walked steadily after a few steps, but I didn’t want her tipping over if another vision pummeled her.

The three of us moved silently to the main house. However, the farther we got the more irritated Di seemed.

“I’m fine,” she hissed. She brushed our hands off. Jacinda and I eyed one another but allowed Di some distance.

THE DAY PASSED slowly. My thoughts meandered between Flint and the new girl arriving. When two o’clock finally rolled around, Jacinda and I went in search of Mica, the twins and Flint. They needed to know about the new girl, and they needed to know to return early tonight for the meeting. Di, meanwhile, returned to the cabin to try and see her.

Jacinda headed off to the guest barn, and I trudged up the hill to the work barn. I knew I’d probably see Dean.

I sighed heavily. Ignoring him wasn’t being fair. Even though I was looking for the twins, Mica and Flint, I knew I should clear the air.

Sure enough, Dean was working on one of the horses when I entered the barn. A grin flashed across his face when I stepped inside.

"Hey, Lena." He straightened and dusted his hands off. A leather apron covered his clothes. "I didn't see ya yesterday. I think that's the first time we've missed a ride since you started workin' here." He cleared his throat and smiled awkwardly.

I stuffed my hands into my pockets and kicked at non-existent pebbles. "Yeah, it was a busy morning. I decided to stay in the cabin for the afternoon."

His eyebrows rose. "Right . . . sure."

I twirled a strand of hair between my fingers. "Have you seen Mica, Jet, Jasper or Flint?"

"They're at the lower barn with Jessie."

"Oh." *So Jacinda's probably found them.*

"Everything okay?" he asked.

"Yep, everything's fine." Since I didn't need to find them, I knew I needed to get this conversation over with. I stuffed my hands into my pockets. "So . . . about the other night. I . . . well . . . I just wanted to say that I really like you, but—"

Dean held up his hand. He wouldn't meet my gaze. "You don't need to say anymore."

"I don't?"

His mouth tightened. "I get it."

At least ten seconds of awkward silence passed. I wrung my hands. "Dean, I really like you a lot. You're one of my best friends."

He laughed humorlessly and turned back to shod the horse. "Best friend, huh?"

I winced. "I'm sorry. I just don't feel any more than that."

Scraping sounds filled the barn. "Does this have anything to do with Flint?"

My cheeks flushed. "Why would you think that?"

More scraping sounded. Dean continued to file the horse's hoof. "I'm not an idiot, Lena. The guy goes crazy every time he sees us hangin' out, but since you never said you two were together, I thought ya were fair game."

I awkwardly clasped my hands together.

"So that ain't true?" Dean asked. "You guys are actually together?"

“Um, well, I don’t know. We weren’t before, or anything like that, but now,” I paused, thinking about last night. “I guess we kind of are.”

“I figured as much.” He stood and grasped the horse’s lead rope. When he tried to walk by me, I grabbed his arm. His muscles bunched underneath my fingertips.

“I know this is really cliché but can we still be friends?”

For a second, I didn’t think he was going to reply. He stared over my head, his mouth a tight line. I shuffled from foot to foot.

He finally met my gaze and sighed. A sad smile spread across his face. Pulling me into a hug, he sighed. “Yeah, of course. We can still be friends.”

Embraced in his strong arms, his scent surrounded me. Horse, sweat and some kind of cedar deodorant. It wasn’t an intoxicating scent that made me want to close my eyes in bliss, but he didn’t stink.

I hugged him back. He held me a bit longer than a “friend” would but I let him.

When I finally pulled back, he let go reluctantly. I stuffed my hands into my back pockets. “Do you want to go for a ride today?”

A wistful expression covered his face but with a blink, it was gone. He took a step back. “Yeah, of course. Just let me finish up in here.”

BY THE TIME the evening rolled around, I felt better about everything with Dean. We’d gone on our usual ride. He’d been friendly and joking, just like he usually was.

A few times I caught him watching me, his eyes soft, but each time he smiled and said something funny. I knew things would be weird between us for a while, but I hoped with time he’d see that Flint and I were serious about one another.

At least, I thought we were serious.

I frowned as Jacinda, Di and I walked back to the cabin following the supper meal. It was already getting dark. Surely Flint and I were more than friends now. Right?

“What time are the guys and Mica done tonight?” Di asked.

“Any minute,” Jacinda replied. “Flint said they’d come straight down from the barn. Have you had more visions of her?”

“A few. Not as strong as the one this morning, but I’m feeling more and more confident that she’s arriving tomorrow.”

“Do you know what time?” I asked.

“No.” Di fingered her temples. “Let’s get back to the cabin. I want to try and see her again. Hopefully I can find out.”

We reached the porch and climbed the steps. I sat down on the porch swing. “I’ll wait here.”

“Waiting for someone?” Jacinda winked.

I rolled my eyes.

She laughed and walked inside with Di.

I leaned back on the swing as the door closed softly behind them. The wooden seat boards were hard and uncomfortable, but I liked how the seat swung easily and the gentle creak it made.

A few minutes later, Flint, Mica and the twins appeared in the distance. They were all talking and laughing as they walked down from the barn. Correction, Mica and the twins were talking and laughing. Flint wasn’t.

Striding toward me, Flint looked so strong, sexy and serious that I actually stopped breathing. A feeling that was becoming all too familiar coursed through me. It was as if someone had hooked me up to a generator. An electric jolt of awareness followed by a hot feeling of lust slid through me, as though my senses caught on fire.

Nobody had ever affected me like he did.

He was about ten yards away when he realized I sat there, watching him. I felt his energy pick up. It rolled toward me in steady waves. A smile tugged at his lips.

When the four of them climbed the porch, Flint walked over and sat beside me. The other three stopped by the door.

Jet winked when I caught his gaze, a knowing glint in his eye. I would have blushed, but the envious expression on Mica’s face stopped it. She glanced at me and Flint, then Jasper. A hunger appeared in her gaze as she stared at the twin. It wasn’t the first inkling I had that Mica was interested in Jasper. Her look now, though, confirmed it.

“How was work?” I asked.

Jet shrugged and leaned against the door frame. “Nothing earth shattering.”

A tapping on the window sounded. Jacinda beckoned everyone to come in.

“The goddess calls.” Jet pushed away from the door and walked inside. Mica and Jasper followed. I made a move to stand, but Flint stopped me.

“They can wait a minute,” he said.

My heart rate increased at his deep tone. I lowered myself back beside him. He brushed a strand of hair from my face. The contact sent tingles along my spine.

“Have a good day?” He leaned closer.

My heart slammed against my ribs. “Um, yeah,” I said a little breathlessly.

His lips moved closer, nearly touching the sensitive skin on my neck. Flint inhaled but then stiffened.

I barely noticed. He was millimeters away from touching me, but then he leaned down and smelled my shirt. Then he smelled my shoulder.

Energy exploded off him. “Care to tell me why you smell like *Dean?”*

It took me a moment to snap out of my dazed state. “What? Dean?”

A muscle ticked in Flint’s jaw. “Yes, Dean. You smell like him.” Flint inhaled tightly. “It smells like he’s been all over you.”

“Really?” I leaned down and sniffed my shirt. Lingering scents of horse, sweat and Dean’s deodorant indeed clung to my clothing. It finally clicked. “Oh, right. He gave me a hug this afternoon. That’s probably why I smell like him.”

“A hug? Is that all he gave you?”

I almost laughed but then realized he was serious. I bit my cheek to stop from smiling. “Yes. I promise. That’s all.”

Flint leaned back, that unreadable expression on his face again. He took a few deep breaths, his strong shoulders rising and falling. If it hadn’t been for my gift, I’d have no idea how he was feeling. But since my clouds didn’t lie, I felt the anger pulsing off him. Anger he was trying desperately to get under control.

After a minute, he sighed heavily and raked a hand through his hair. “You’re gonna be the death of me, woman.”

Another shiver ran through me. Something told me I wasn’t going to mind Flint’s possessiveness at all. In a way, it was incredibly arousing. “Are you okay?” I asked.

He took another deep breath. “Yeah, just give me a minute.”

It seemed to take him at least that long to calm down. When he finally did, he rubbed his face in his hands. “I hate the thought of you with another guy,” he muttered. “Sorry for going all alpha male on you.”

“I think I like it. It’s kind of hot.”

He smirked. “Kind of hot, huh?” He shook his head and grinned. “Come on, let’s go inside. They’re waiting for us.”

THE CHAIRS AND couches had been moved to form a circle in the living room. Flint and I sat on the free couch just as Di strode into the room. She wore clean black yoga pants and a long-sleeve black shirt.

“She’s definitely coming tomorrow,” Di stated. “I’m thinking she’ll be somewhere in Gunnison.” Di sat on the free chair and scooted it closer to the group.

“So we go to Gunnison,” Flint said.

Di nodded. “All in favor?”

Everyone immediately voiced their agreement. “Lena?” Di glanced in my direction. “Do you approve?”

I sat up straighter. “Oh, yes.”

“What time are we leaving?” Mica asked. “And how are we gonna all get off work? I don’t think Pete’s gonna like that.”

“Or Val,” Jacinda added with a frown.

Di glanced at Flint briefly before turning to the group. “I think it’s best if most of us stay here.”

“What?” Mica said. “Why? We always go.”

“This one’s different,” Di said. “She always seems frightened and is never talking to anyone. Not like Lena.”

My mouth dropped at her teasing tone, but Di just carried on, her face serious again. “One interesting thing about this girl, is she always has an animal with her. At least a dozen times now, I’ve seen her with a stray dog or cat. Once, I saw her with an iguana.” Di shook her head. “I think two, three max, should get her. And we definitely need a woman in the group. I have a feeling if it’s all men, she’ll run.”

“I’ll go,” Mica volunteered.

“And almost blow it like you did with Lena?” Jet replied. “I don’t think so.”

“I didn’t blow it,” Mica retorted.

Jacinda patted Mica’s hand. “You were pretty close. A few times you almost gave us away.”

“I did not,” Mica protested but not as loudly this time. I watched Mica’s growing irritation and thought back to what she’d said to me when

we'd first met. I couldn't recall exactly *what* was said, but I did remember others interrupting her.

"So Mica's out," Di said matter-of-factly. Mica crossed her arms. "Jacinda?" Di added.

Jacinda shook her head. "I think Lena should go. I mean, look at her. She's about as innocent as they get."

"What does that mean?" I asked.

"Good point," Di said. "Okay, Lena, you're going."

"I am?"

"Yes," Di replied. "Now, should another girl go? Or a guy?"

"Since Mica's out, and since Lena's going, I think a guy should go," Jacinda said. "Val won't be happy if two of us disappear from the kitchen."

Jasper nodded. "That makes sense."

Di clasped her hands. "So what guy is going?"

"I'll go," Jasper said. "And Jet can stay here. That way if we need to talk to you all, I can tell him, and he can relay the message."

Jacinda's eyes brightened. "Good idea, Jasper."

"Yes, that makes sense," Di agreed. "Okay, so Lena and Jasper will go."

"I'll go too," Flint said.

"Big surprise," Jacinda murmured and winked at Jet. Jet chuckled. Mica crossed her arms even tighter across her chest. Her gaze glued to something on the floor.

"Okay so Flint, Jasper and Lena?" Di said. "All in favor?"

Everyone agreed, except for Mica and me. Mica's reaction made me hesitate. Finally, I said yes. Mica still didn't say anything. The entire group stared at her.

"Mica?" Jacinda elbowed her gently. "Come on, we need you to agree."

Eventually, she mumbled her agreement.

"So that's settled," Di said. "Now, we have to work out how you three are going to get her into the Suburban . . ."

THE MEETING CONTINUED well into the evening. Everyone, other than Mica, chipped in ideas on the best way to approach the new girl and lure her back to the ranch. It was also agreed that we would stay on the ranch until someone remembered something prior to the first morning we

woke up. Either that, or until Di received a vision that gave us a direction to follow.

About halfway through the meeting, Flint raced up to the main house to speak with Pete and Val about a few of us missing work. Since it was Di's scheduled day off tomorrow, she agreed to switch shifts with me. Only Flint and Jasper would miss work.

When Pete and Val asked why they needed to miss work, Flint made up some story about an old friend of ours getting in contact with us. He said we'd only just heard from her and that she was arriving into Gunnison the next day. She was hoping to join us on our travels and was willing to work on the ranch until we carried on.

Luckily, the Henderson's bought the story and were willing to give the new girl some part-time work. They didn't ask any other questions, thankfully. It had been a lucky break. If the ranching couple had been adamant none of us miss work, or hadn't been willing to welcome the new girl, we all would have had to pack our bags and sneak out during the night. I didn't like the thought of that, especially since that was how their previous help left.

By the time the meeting finished, a pitch-black sky stretched outside. The dim light from the two lamps in the living room cast a somnolent glow.

"Meeting adjourned?" Di asked.

Everyone stood. Jet groaned loudly with a stretch, while Flint leaned down and whispered, "Going to bed?"

"I guess."

He trailed a finger along my cheek. "We could go for another walk. It's not that late."

Everyone was preoccupied with rearranging the furniture and chatting about the new girl. No one seemed to notice when Flint and I sneaked out.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

We took off at a brisk walk. I unconsciously headed toward the barn, and Flint followed.

"What do you want to do?" he asked.

I shook my head as I realized where I was going. "I always go to the barn when I leave the cabin. Habit."

"We can go there."

We walked quietly across the grass. I knew Flint slowed his speed, since he almost ambled beside my hurried pace. He didn't swing me up on his back, thankfully. The butterflies flapping in my stomach were hard enough to swallow, and the fast walking helped.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked when we reached the base of the hill.

"Butterflies."

He raised his eyebrows.

"Metaphorically speaking."

He just shook his head and smiled.

As we climbed the hill, I breathed heavily. Flint wasn't even winded. At the top, I took a deep breath and wiped sweat from my brow. "I don't think I'll ever get used to that hill."

"I could carry you."

"I'm not that incapacitated."

Chuckling, he entwined his fingers through mine. "Do you want to go into the barn or out back?"

His question took me a minute to process since all of my thoughts focused on the feel of his hand. "Um, out back."

He tugged me in that direction.

We wandered to the back of the barn. I walked toward the gate, but Flint pulled me to the nearest fence. "This will do."

Before I could ask what he meant, his hands locked around my waist. A sailing sensation took my breath away. A second later, I was dropped on

the other side. I shook my head. “You like doing that, don’t you?”

He shrugged. “Maybe.” With a bend of his knees and a rush of air later, he stood beside me. He’d jumped the fence as if it were only a foot tall.

I gazed at him in amazement. “I don’t know if I’ll ever get used to that either.”

He just chuckled and clasped my hand again.

We walked down the pasture along the fence railing. Tall grass brushed along our calves, making a swishing sound. The horses stood in a huddle on the other side of the field. Moonlight washed over their broad backs.

Flint pulled me toward the center of the pasture and stopped at a large boulder poking up from the earth. “Here okay?”

“Sure.”

He cupped my waist and lifted me onto the rock. At least this time, he did it at a normal speed. My head didn’t spin when he set me down. Once I was settled, he easily climbed up beside me.

Spreading his legs, he pulled me to him so my back snuggled against his chest. I closed my eyes. The feel of his hard abdomen and steely arms looped around my middle made heat flare in my veins. He brushed my hair away from my neck, his fingers trailing along my skin.

“Is it in the way?” I reached up to move my hair.

“Yes, but I like that. Leave it.”

His dominant tone made me shiver again.

“Cold?” Flint murmured.

He seemed to mistakenly think the breeze was the cause of my shiver. “No.”

Flint pulled me closer, his scent everywhere. He swiveled me around until we faced each other, and his lips found mine. Once again, emotions completely took over when he kissed me. It was as though a fire burst to life deep in my belly and the longer his lips explored mine, the larger the fire roared.

When he finally pulled back, I panted. We sat like that, only inches away from one another. The mountain air flowed around us, scents of milkweed and grass carried in it, the soft knicker of horses in the distance. Our breaths puffed and swirled together.

“Do you think we knew each other, before?” he asked quietly.

I gave a small nod. It was all I could manage.

He grunted and kissed me again. This time, I could feel that he held nothing back. I met him every step of the way, not caring that we were out in a field, on display for anyone walking by. My entire world became him and me on the rock. The energy around him grew, pulling me into its power. It pulsed and throbbed, as if in sync with our desire.

He abruptly stopped, his breathing harsh. I squirmed, wanting more.

“Damn, woman. You’re going to make me forget that we’re in the middle of a field.”

I was breathless when I replied, “The grass is pretty tall. Nobody would see us if we laid down in it.”

He chuckled and nipped my ear. “I’d love that, and I’d do that right now, except for one, tiny detail.”

“What?” My eyes closed again when his lips blazed a trail down my neck.

“I don’t think I’d be able to stop.”

“Would we need to stop?”

He groaned. “Damn, woman.”

I wiggled closer to him.

He stilled my hips. His large hands pressed hotly into me. I could practically feel his heat through my jeans. “Not here. Not like this.”

A rush of air and blur of movement later, and he stood twenty feet away from me. He did it so fast, I blinked a few times. The rock felt hard, cold and entirely empty.

“Come back,” I said.

“Give me a minute.”

I waited in the chilly breeze until he returned. With one powerful leap, he sat beside me again. My eyes widened even though the field appeared empty.

“How do you know nobody can see when you do stuff like that?” I asked.

“Because we’re alone up here.”

“Are you sure?”

“The guests know this barn is off-limits, and all of the cowboys finished for the day when we did.”

“I never knew this place was off-limits.” I thought about the day I’d climbed the blasted hill and met Dean. Technically, I wasn’t on staff at that point.

“That’s because you didn’t read the guest handbook.”

His tsking expression made me laugh. “And you did?”

“Cover to cover.”

I rolled my eyes. “You and Di with your rules.”

He pinched my side gently which got a squeal out of me. Chuckling, he replied, “At least one of us has to keep you out of trouble.”

Flint draped his arm around my shoulders. Another spark of desire flowed through me, but I made myself ignore it. Slow, steady pushes of his energy still pulsed into me. I knew I wasn’t the only one having a hard time reining in my need.

We both obviously needed a distraction.

“So . . . what do you think the new girl will be like?” I asked.

He took another deep breath and then another. Slowly, his energy subsided. “Not sure.”

“Di hasn’t told you about her visions? When she sees her?”

“Yes and no. She tells me when she sees her, but she doesn’t give me details, not real details anyway. Only the generalized stuff, like what she told us at the meeting.”

“Oh.” I thought for sure Di told Flint everything. “Why not?”

“Di’s a very private person.”

“But aren’t her visions something we should all know?”

“Not really. Di sees people at all times of the day. Sometimes she sees people in situations most wouldn’t want to be seen in. She takes her visions seriously and feels it’s a betrayal of that person’s privacy if she divulges every detail.”

I hadn’t thought of it like that. “Is that why she’s always so serious?”

He shook his head. “That’s probably because she’s always stressed. Di feels a lot of responsibility for our group. If she wasn’t able to locate all of us, none of us would have found each other.”

I chewed my lip. Again, I hadn’t thought of it that way. “I never considered that.” We were quiet for a moment, then I said, “What did she say when she saw me? Did she tell you anything?”

“She didn’t tell the rest of the group anything other than what they needed to know, but she told me a few details. More details than she usually does. Such as you had long, red hair. *Wild and the color of fire*, were the exact words she’d used. She also said you were dirty and very thin.” His tone changed, growing rougher. “I think that’s why she opened up to me.

She couldn’t figure you out. After she told me more about you, we guessed you were naturally a thin person, not realizing you were homeless and starving, but neither of us knew how thin you’d be. We couldn’t figure out why you were so dirty, though.”

I remembered my homeless days all too vividly.

“She also said you were always talking to people. Lots of people.”

“Meeting people was the only thing I enjoyed in my travels.”

Flint grunted. “When you started hitchhiking, Di got really confused. She kept seeing you with a new person every time she saw you. Since it never occurred to us you wouldn’t have money to travel, we figured you sought people out and liked the company. We never guessed, or even considered, that you were hitching rides.”

“Well, there is some truth in that. I *did* like the company.”

“I know.” His energy picked up again. A hot wave rolled over me. “I still never want you doing that again.”

I put my hand over my heart. “I won’t. Promise.”

WE CONTINUED TALKING well into the night. When we walked back to the cabin, Flint offered to swing me up on his back.

In the black night, I knew no one would see, but nerves churned inside me anyway.

“We’ll be fine,” Flint whispered. “If I move fast enough, I’m a blur and then no one can see me.”

He wasn’t kidding. When we reached the cabin, I felt sick. He’d run much faster than he had the previous night. “Are you okay?” He gently lowered me down.

I sank onto the porch step. “So much for not getting motion sickness.”

He frowned and sat beside me. “I’m sorry.”

I took a deep breath and shook my head. “It’s okay. It just took me by surprise.”

He helped me stand, then led me inside the dark and quiet cabin. Everyone was asleep so we tiptoed into my room. Mica snored softly. I almost giggled when she started talking in her sleep, mumbling about horses and Jasper.

Flint smiled. “Is she always like that?”

I shrugged. “No idea. I’ve never heard her talk before, so if she is, I probably sleep through it.”

I walked to the bunk bed, and Flint followed silently behind. “Do you need to get undressed?” he whispered.

“Yeah, I should.”

Bright moonlight flooded the room, making shadows around us. He leaned against the wall and crossed his arms. Hot energy rolled toward me. With a start, I realized he planned to stay that way.

My eyes bulged. “You want to watch?”

He nodded.

A burst of self-consciousness fired through me, but the heat in Flint’s gaze melted it away. He found me sexy. I could feel it. His energy couldn’t lie.

Taking a deep breath, I unbuttoned my jeans and slowly shimmied them down my hips, letting them fall to the floor. I kicked them to the side before removing my top. For the first time, I was thankful for the shopping trip Jacinda insisted on. I wore a lacy bra with matching panties, both a deep navy with lime-green trim.

I also sent up silent thanks for all of the abundant food as I no longer resembled a skeleton. Soft skin and smooth curves had replaced the bony prominences and muscled planes that had been there only a month before.

“Do you want help up to your bunk?” Flint asked, his voice catching.

“If you’d like to.”

He scooped me up and placed me gently on my mattress before jumping up beside me, the mattress dipping. He then pressed soft kisses down my neck.

His rough clothing rubbed against my bare skin while his scent made my head swim. I splayed my hands across his chest, marveling at the strength flowing under his skin. I could feel it, like a river, a current, always there but varying in its intensity.

At times like this, when his heart raced with desire, it increased. The raw energy exploded around him, like a raging whitewater until it grew out, pulsing in a sphere around us. I gasped at its intensity.

As if knowing what I sensed, he leaned down and tilted my chin up. “You have no idea how much I want you.”

His lips locked against mine, and suddenly, his hands were everywhere. My fingers threaded through his hair as all coherent thought left me. His hands caressed, gripped, and pulled me tightly against him.

I gasped at the sensations rolling through me, like wave after wave of desire and energy balled into one. His mouth never left mine as his hands explored and roamed over every inch of my skin. I felt on fire, that I could be consumed right there.

It was only when Mica groaned from below that we stilled. Flint's mouth tore from mine, his breathing ragged in the quiet room.

My eyes bulged as I realized what we'd been doing. I hastily pulled a sheet over me.

"Damn," Flint breathed, putting a few inches of distance between us.

"Is she awake?" I whispered.

Flint glanced over the edge. Soft snores floated up again when he pulled back. "Doesn't appear to be."

My cheeks heated more as I realized what we'd been doing with Mica right beneath us.

Flint ran a hand up and down my back while taking deep, steadying breaths. "You have no idea what you do to me," he said quietly.

I laughed humorlessly. "Oh, I think I do. It's pretty much the same you do to me."

He nipped my ear. "I should go."

"Yeah." We'd already pushed our luck by how much we'd done. As fun as it had been, I didn't want to get caught. That would be mortifying.

"Goodnight," he whispered, kissing me again.

"Night," I murmured. And with that, he was gone.

I WOKE AT four in the morning, a thousand thoughts flying through my head.

Between what Flint and I had done last night and finding the new girl today, my mind wouldn't stop, like a wash machine stuck on spin cycle. Even though I'd only slept a few hours, I didn't feel tired.

How could so much be happening all at once? Flint and I seemed more like a couple every day, we were picking up the new girl today, and then . . .

It was possible answers lurked just around the corner. The answers I'd so desperately hoped to find for almost five months.

When the sun finally crested the horizon, I stood on the porch, ready to go. Normally, I would have grumbled at the early hour. However, since I was still buzzing, I itched to move.

Mica and Jacinda sleepily waved goodbye from the living room. Given Mica's unremarkable expression, I guessed she'd slept through Flint's and my extracurricular activities last night. My cheeks still flushed when I met her gaze. She may not have known what happened right above her, but *I* did.

Fresh morning air swirled around as I zipped my sweatshirt up. Di stood at my side, still wearing her pajamas: black yoga pants and a black T-shirt. Even at night, she wore black.

She stood, shivering, until Jasper and Flint finally emerged from their cabin. My eyes locked with Flint's.

He smiled knowingly.

My heart beat erratically as I watched him walk down the steps. His lips tugged up when he caught me watching him.

Di gripped my arm before I could join them. "Are you sure you know what to do?"

"Yes. I won't mess up."

Her grip tightened. "You're sure?"

I almost rolled my eyes. "I'm sure."

Jasper, Flint and I climbed in the Suburban, all of us silent. Knowing Flint would be driving, I sat in the front. Jasper buckled into the backseat, the loud click echoing.

Cold air swirled around us. The temperature couldn't be above forty. I zipped my sweatshirt all the way to my throat and pulled the hood over my head. A few strands of my hair escaped, tickling my face.

Flint started the vehicle, and the engine purred to life, breaking the peaceful mountain quiet. Di leaned down to talk through Flint's open window.

"Do you all remember what you need to do?"

"We'll be fine, Di," Flint said.

Di leaned to the side to see Jasper better. "And you'll call Jet if anything happens?"

"Yep," Jasper replied.

"Are you all *sure* you know what you're doing?"

Jasper sighed. "Di, chill out, we'll be okay."

She continued to gaze at us. "Call Jet if anything happens. I'll tell him to call you if I see anything change."

Flint gripped the steering wheel. “You still don’t have any idea what time she’s arriving?”

Di bit her lip. “No, but the sun’s always bright when I see her, so it could be mid-morning, this afternoon, or even early evening. Just whatever you do, don’t leave Gunnison airport without her.”

Flint put the Suburban into drive. “We’ll be in touch.”

Di stepped back from the door, her arms crossed. “Let me know when you have her.”

Flint waved and with a spin of tires we were off. Cool air blew in through Flint’s window as we flew down the gravel driveway. I crossed my arms tightly over my chest.

“Cold?” Flint asked.

“A little.”

He rolled up his window, the electric hum filling the car. I let my hood fall back.

He reached over and tucked a long strand of hair behind my ear. “I had fun last night.”

I smiled, trying not to squirm. “Me too.”

“What’d you guys do?” Jasper asked.

“Oh.” I sat up straighter and cleared my throat. “We went to the barn and hung out in the pastures.”

“Uh-huh.” That one word said exactly how much Jasper believed that was *all* we did.

Once we reached the end of the driveway, Flint steered toward Little Raven. We drove languidly on the county road. It would take around two hours to get to Gunnison, and considering how early it was, Flint didn’t hurry.

When we reached the outskirts of Little Raven, Flint slowed. “Coffees?”

Jasper and I answered enthusiastically.

After finding a coffee house, a lone vibrant oasis in an otherwise sleepy town, we climbed back in the Suburban, lattes and mochas in tow. I wrapped my fingers around the wonderfully warm beverage.

As we left the small town, the Suburban hummed quietly. Flashes of trees and mountains zoomed past. I watched until Little Raven disappeared.

It was hard to believe that only three weeks ago, I’d arrived in this small town, full of hope at finding my family and lost home. How wrong I

had been.

For all I knew, I didn't have a family, possibly, I never had. The only family I had were the six strangers who picked me up. Under different circumstances, that might have brought a smile to my face, but given we were on our way to pick up *another* stranger—my thoughts twisted and turned with all the reasons for why that was.

I raised my arm, rested it against the door, and cupped my chin in my palm. Flint set my coffee in the console and squeezed my free hand.

The small gesture grasped my attention. Just the feel of him evoked that inevitable feeling of safety. The anxiety and sadness that had been growing in me abated. I squeezed him back.

He cocked his head. The early sun played off the natural highlights in his hair, turning his brownish locks into teasing specks of gold. I could tell he knew something was up.

"Are you okay?" he asked quietly.

I nodded, even though that wasn't entirely true. I wanted to know what happened to us, *needed* to know, but then a wave of despair settled over me. We all knew it was possible we'd never have answers. It was possible I'd die not knowing who I was.

He squeezed again.

I settled for fingering his palm as the trees zoomed by. Another hour ticked by, and we reached Gunnison.

"Everyone clear on the plan?" Flint asked as we cruised through the streets. It was the first time any of us had spoken. I almost jumped.

"Yes," I replied.

"Jasper?" Flint eyed him in the rearview mirror.

"Yeah," he replied.

As we got to the western edge of town, where the airport sat, I wondered how many planes flew into it each day. I guessed there couldn't be a lot. From the distance, the airport seemed tiny.

Flint pulled onto the road leading to the entrance. "Ready?"

I nodded curtly. "Yes."

"Good." His voice was brusque and businesslike, very similar to how Di's could sound. He pulled up to the main entrance and stopped.

"We'll wait at these doors after we park, and don't forget this." He handed me the suitcase from the back. It was empty, but the new girl would never know that.

I took a deep breath. “Okay.” I eyed Jasper. His bright, blue eyes glowed with excitement. I forced a smile. “See you in there.”

“Good luck,” Jasper called.

I stepped out and was about to close the door, when Flint reached over and caught my hand. “Remember, if it doesn’t work, just meet us at the entrance.”

I tried not to think about how whether or not our current plan worked depended entirely upon *me*.

“You’ll be fine.” He squeezed me again.

I somehow managed a tight smile. “See you soon.”

CHAPTER TWENTY

I closed the door, and they drove off. I knew I wouldn't see them until I found the new girl, so I concentrated on what Di told me. She was supposed to be short, around my height, with brown hair and brown eyes. Di described her as "cute" and said she always appeared scared.

Okay, so I'd just have to find a small woman who resembled a rabbit cornered by a python. Easy, right? I chewed my lip as my nervousness grew. It reminded me of the times I'd felt this before, while I waited on highways and interstates, wondering who I'd ride with next. The unknowing, the what if's, the . . .

I stopped short. *Of all the times I felt this before.*

Grinning, I entered the airport. I knew exactly how I'd find her.

Two hours later, I still ambled around. I hadn't bothered connecting with Flint or Jasper. I knew they'd be waiting by the entrance, since our arranged meeting time wasn't until seven in the evening if I never found her. I had quite a few hours to kill until then.

I once again retraced my steps when I reached the end of a hall and pulled out a granola bar to abate my hunger.

As I passed a few travelers, I murmured hellos to those I made eye contact with. Now that I was cleaned up and presentable looking, some readily greeted me in return. It wasn't like it had been in my homeless days. Then, most people had avoided me like the plague.

An elderly gentleman stopped to ask me where the restroom was, and since I already passed it around three dozen times, I easily gave him directions. Other passengers filtered through the corridor after him, a flight recently arriving. The sparsely populated terminal suddenly had several dozen passengers milling about.

I turned and searched for her. What I saw at the end of the hall stopped me in my tracks.

It was her.

I knew it was her. It was so obvious. I had the ridiculous urge to run toward her and drag her back to Jasper and Flint, like a prized stag. I actually closed my eyes and took a deep breath to calm my racing heart.

She appeared as Di had described: small and petite, with a short but stylish pixie cut of dark brown hair and large, luminous eyes. Cute was a good word to describe her. Terrified was another. She clutched a bag closely to her chest, as though she expected someone to pounce on her at any moment.

If she only knew.

I approached her slowly. When I stood a yard away, I stopped. She must have noticed because she turned and stared directly at me without saying a word. I smiled and hoped my hair wasn't too wild. That could always make me appear a little insane.

"Hello," I said.

Her wide eyes darted around. I thought she might run but instead, her tensed shoulders relaxed. "Hi."

"Did you just get here too?" I made a point of swinging the empty suitcase I carried.

She eyed my luggage. "Yeah."

"Me too."

"You're alone?" Her eyes darted around again.

"Yep, just me. I came here for a summer job. I'm from South Dakota."

"Oh." She frowned. "But it's September."

Crap. "Yeah, well it's kind of a summer/fall job."

She was silent for a moment, then shrugged. I breathed a sigh of relief and studied the cloud that surrounded her. A beautiful indigo aura, mixed with the same blue everyone else in our group had, swirled around her shoulders. It stood out like a topaz gem in a sea of black and white.

It had been so easy to find her. All morning, I'd been walking around with my eyesight permanently fixed in its altered state. When I saw her, I'd known right away that she was number eight.

"I'm Lena, by the way." I waved my free hand while smiling. I could tell she still wasn't sure what to think of me, but she hadn't run yet so I took that as a good sign.

"I'm Amber." She clutched her bag tighter.

"Nice to meet you, Amber. Where are you from?"

She bit her lip. "Um, Lubbock, Texas."

I grinned brightly. “Do you have any more bags?”

“No.”

“Do you have someone picking you up?”

She hung her head, her eyes on her toes. With a deft movement, she shook her head. “No.”

“So you’re driving yourself? Or taking a cab?”

She didn’t reply.

I walked closer until we stood eye-to-eye. “So what are you going to do here?” I made sure to keep my tone friendly.

Instead of answering, she shrugged and continued staring at her toes.

“So you don’t have anywhere you need to be?”

She looked up. Tears welled in her eyes, but instead of acknowledging them I grinned. “Because that’s great news. You could come with me!”

Her gaze widened, and she blinked back the tears. *“What?”*

I continued grinning, feeling like a real idiot, but keeping it up anyway. “I just accepted a job on a cattle ranch, and they’ve been looking for help, so if you need a job you could come with me.”

I knew it was a preposterous thing to offer a random stranger, but since I knew her background, I knew she didn’t have anywhere to go. We’d all agreed this tactic *might* work. But that might, was a big might. It could also backfire. Any second, she could scuttle away and then what?

“Oh,” she replied. She seemed about to run, and I felt a moment of panic, but then she mumbled, “I don’t know if that’s a good idea. I . . . I have . . . somewhere to be.”

“Okay, but it’s a short term position, only for a few more weeks until the tourist season ends. Not to mention, you get to ride horses every day and help with the cattle. But if you have some place to be . . .”

Her head snapped up. “Horses?”

“Oh yeah, horses, cows, dogs and cats too. It’s a ranch, so there are a lot of animals.”

“Really?”

“Most definitely, tons of critters.”

“I like animals.”

I know. “Well, if you don’t have any immediate plans, you could always come with me. They’re still looking for more help. They need someone to help outdoors with the livestock.”

She paused, frowning, her eyes so big they reminded me of a doe. “Well, I don’t know. I’m kind of . . .”

“You’re kind of what?”

“Well . . . I’m looking for—”

“If you’re looking for work, it’s a great job, and like I said, it’s only short term, but if you need to be somewhere . . .” I added, just so I wouldn’t sound too desperate.

She shrugged. Tears welled in her eyes again. Before I could stop myself, I stepped to her side and put my hand on her shoulder.

“Hey, it’s okay, don’t cry.” Her shoulder tensed when I touched her, but she smiled when my hair tickled her cheek.

“Sorry.” I pushed it back. “It’s always getting in the way.”

“It’s pretty. I wish I had long hair.”

“It’s overrated. Not very practical.”

“I bet boys like it,” she said in that small voice again.

I cocked my head. “Yeah, some do.” I thought about Flint. “Especially some of the cowboys on the ranch. A few of them like it.”

“There are cowboys there?”

I let my hand fall from her shoulder. “Yeah, quite a few.” I watched, puzzled, as a new interest grew on her face.

“So there are real cowboys and lots of animals on this ranch, and this job’s only for a few weeks?”

“If that’s what works for you.”

She gazed at me and slowly, for the first time, smiled. Shiny white teeth emerged between her pert mouth. “If they don’t hire me, I can come back here?”

“Of course.”

“Um, I guess I could go.”

“Really?” I felt as stupid as I sounded. Had it really been that easy?

She smiled again. “Yeah, let’s go.”

I bit my lip in puzzlement as we began walking. “We just have to find Flint and Jasper.”

“Flint and Jasper?”

“Yeah, they’re two cowboys from the ranch. They’ll give us a ride.”

“Are they cute?”

“Ah, yes,” I replied hesitantly.

She grinned.

Unease settled in my stomach, but I ignored it and told myself to be grateful she was coming. We meandered toward the entrance where Flint and Jasper waited. Jasper stood leaning against the wall, his arms crossed, but Flint was pacing. The minute our eyes connected, he stopped.

"I'll be right back," I said to Amber. She was already staring at Jasper and Flint. I walked as quickly as I could to the guys.

When I was a yard from Flint, he said, "What's wrong?"

"Relax, she wants to come."

"Are you serious?" Jasper pushed away from the wall.

"Completely serious."

Flint smiled, shaking his head. "Di and Jacinda were right."

I shrugged, not too sure how much I had to do with it. I glanced over my shoulder and motioned Amber over. She hurried to my side.

"Amber, this is Jasper and Flint."

"Hi," Amber eyed Jasper first and then Flint. "These are the cowboys?" Her gaze lingered a bit longer on Flint than I thought was necessary.

"Are you ready?" Flint reached down and took my empty suitcase.

"Here." Jasper reached for Amber's bag. "I'll carry yours." She smiled prettily, and he grinned at her a little too broadly. I wanted to kick him, but then realized Amber seemed to enjoy the attention. I frowned again and followed Flint.

The sun shone brightly when we stepped out of the terminal. Five minutes later, we were climbing in the Suburban. Amber buckled herself beside Jasper, who in no time, turned on the charm. A small giggle escaped the latest newcomer when we exited the parking lot. The happy sound for some reason grated on my nerves.

"Hey." Flint nudged my leg. "Are you okay?"

I forced a smile. "Yeah, just tired."

The journey back to the ranch was quite different from the journey in. Amber's coy smiles and batting eyelashes had Jasper practically drooling. The few times she'd engaged Flint in conversation a white hot, searing jealousy flashed through me.

I clenched my hands into fists when we turned onto the ranch's gravel driveway. Just what exactly had we gotten ourselves into?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Jacinda shook out her kitchen rug on the porch. “So what do you think of Amber?”

Amber had been with us for two full days, yet each day had felt like a year.

“Oh, I dunno, she’s okay I guess.” I slapped my braided rug harder.

Jacinda raised an eyebrow. “You guess? Are you saying you don’t mind how she flirts with Flint?”

“Oh, that. Well . . .”

We’d told Amber yesterday morning who we were. She’d taken it pretty well. To say she now thought she belonged in our group put it mildly. The timid, meek girl Di saw in her visions had entirely disappeared. A flirty, bodacious young woman had taken her place.

She still loved animals and spent most of the last forty-eight hours with the cowboys and cattle, although half of that reason seemed to be *because* of the cowboys. I’d warned Amber on day one about Aaron, but I wondered if she realized how dangerous he may be. She flirted with him too.

I clenched my teeth and slapped my rug harder.

“I knew you didn’t like her,” Jacinda teased.

I eyed Jacinda. She just laughed. It was me, Jacinda and Amber in the kitchen today. Val had requested Amber work with us which didn’t go over well with the newcomer. She pouted and said I promised she could work with the livestock. But after Di reminded her that Pete and Val were our bosses, she relented, however the pouting continued.

“We better go in.” Jacinda rolled up her rug.

I reluctantly followed her inside.

Di was enjoying her day off, but I wished it was me having a free day. My morning hadn’t exactly gone well. I spilled orange juice all over myself during breakfast after Amber declared she was joining Flint in the afternoon for a ride. Burning anger and disbelief had taken control, and since I only

saw red, I didn’t see the buffet table on my way back to the kitchen. I walked right into it, and the pitcher of juice I’d been carrying ended up all over my jeans.

I told myself repeatedly that what Amber said couldn’t possibly be true. While Flint and I had never declared ourselves together—we were. Right?

Amber was still in the kitchen when we entered, although Val seemed to be doing most of the work. Amber sat propped on the counter with her legs crossed daintily beneath her.

“So, Dean’s single too?” she asked Val.

Val continued mixing something in a bowl. “I suppose so, m’dear, but I’m not sure. I guess you’d have to ask him.”

Familiar country music floated through the air. Some woman sang of losing her man and nursing a broken heart. Prophetic? I hoped not.

When Amber saw us, she smiled. “Hey girls, those rugs done?”

“Yes.” Jacinda set them back on the floor.

“Is there anything else we need to do?” Amber jumped off the counter gracefully.

“Just the tables to wipe off, but you go on. I’ll do it,” Val replied.

“Really?” Amber asked.

I scowled at Amber. “I’ll do it, Val.”

Grabbing the bucket, I filled it with soapy water. Amber’s large, pretty brown eyes followed me when I passed her. I avoided her questioning gaze. I also ignored her twitching nose. Amber’s ability was her incredibly heightened sense of smell. She could also smell emotions. It was why she was so good with animals, since she could smell how they felt.

I could only guess what scent she got off me right now.

Her tattoo, on the other hand, was exactly as Flint predicted. It was similar to Di’s but different—a half circle attached to a full circle with a cross on the other side. Like Flint had guessed, it was the symbol for Mercury.

Eight tattoos. Eight planets. Eight individuals. We were all together now.

Di and Flint had also been right about her last name. On Amber’s fake identification, her name read Amber Williams. Another top last name in the U.S. And, like the others, she’d also woken up in a luxury condominium

with tons of money, although she'd awoken in Lubbock, Texas. Another random location.

I plunged into work and scrubbed the first table I reached with more force than necessary. I didn't want to think about our strange situation anymore, or more upsetting, what Amber said about Flint. I returned to the bucket to rinse out the washcloth as another pair of hands dipped in beside mine. A strained smile covered Jacinda's face when I glanced up.

"With two of us doing this, we'll be done in no time."

I frowned. "Where's Amber? Isn't she going to help?"

Jacinda shrugged. "Ah, no, she left."

"Where'd she go?"

Jacinda hastily wiped down a table, not meeting my eyes. "Not sure."

"She's going on a ride with Flint, isn't she?"

Jacinda muttered something under her breath and turned to face me. "Who knows, Lena. Really, don't worry. I see how Flint looks at you. You have nothing to worry about."

"But she said she was joining Flint for a ride?"

Jacinda made a face. "Yeah, but—"

"But nothing. Let's just finish up here."

I walked away before Jacinda could say anything else. I didn't stop until I sailed clear across the dining room so she wouldn't see the tears brimming in my eyes. The rational part of my brain knew Amber could be lying. It could all be made up. But the emotional part of my brain? Inside, I was crumbling to pieces.

Even if Amber had lied, the question was why? Why would she do that? Wasn't it obvious Flint and I were together? Why would she want to break that up?

Suddenly, I hated Amber. Hated her with such ferocity it stunned me. I tried not to picture her cute face and wide luminous eyes, or how she walked so confidently among the cowboys. I'd never seen Flint look at her the way Tyler and Aaron had, but that didn't mean he hadn't.

No! He wouldn't do that! The Flint I knew would never do that.

My hand slammed down on the table as I viciously scrubbed every inch of it. I kept telling myself over and over that Flint would never date Amber *and* me at the same time, but still, a seed of doubt had planted. All it needed was a stray thought or two that doubted his sincerity and it bloomed to life.

Jacinda, bless her soul, remained quiet. She didn't say one word after we finished and returned to the cabin. Di sat in the living room when we entered, but I was in no mood to talk to her either. Instead, I stalked straight to my room and slammed the door.

I paced back and forth a few times, too restless and angry to stop moving. Before I knew what I was doing, I changed into my riding jeans and walked back to the living room to look under all the tables and chairs.

"What do you need?" Jacinda asked. She and Di sat on the couch. Both watched me with puckered brows.

"Have you seen my cowboy boots?" I picked up my sweatshirt lying on the floor and tossed it back in my room.

"By the door," Jacinda said. "You left them on the porch last night. I pulled them inside so bugs wouldn't crawl in them."

"Thanks." I turned before she could say anything else. I hauled my boots out to the porch and sat on the swing. The stiff leather didn't slip over my heel right away which flared my annoyance.

"Lena, where are you going?" Di asked.

She and Jacinda stood in the cabin's doorway. Their puckered brows had deepened.

"I don't know." And I didn't. All I knew was that I needed to get out of this place. I needed to go somewhere. Anywhere. If I stopped moving, my mind would fill with pictures of Amber riding with Flint, talking with him, kissing him. My breath choked in my chest. It didn't matter that it could all be a lie. The pain radiating through me bordered on unbearable. I stood and bolted down the porch steps.

"Lena, wait!" Di yelled.

I ignored her and ran blindly across the ranch. It wasn't until my breathing became so labored that I realized I was huffing up the hill to the barn. Unconsciously, I'd escaped to the one place I felt best. When I finally crested the hill, I stopped for a minute. Nobody lingered around, not even Dean.

I strode into the barn and walked past the stalls. I didn't find anyone inside the barn either which suited me perfectly. After grabbing a grooming bucket and saddle, I walked unsteadily out to the back pastures, trying to carry everything all at once.

That didn't go well.

I dropped the saddle at one point, and the bridle's reins slipped all the way down and almost tripped me. I cursed each time I was slowed. With a sharp whistle, I called Coal. I didn't see any movement or hear any thundering hooves. I whistled again.

Nothing.

Dean must have taken him. I kicked the fence post. Surveying the pasture, I looked for a different horse and spotted a stout bay gelding. In record time, I had him saddled.

We trotted down the pastures before breaking into a canter. Just as I reached the last corral, I heard something behind me. I turned my head to see two figures by the barn.

I knew who they were, even from the distance. Di and Jacinda. For whatever reason, they'd followed me.

Instead of circling back to them, I nudged the gelding into a gallop. His thundering hooves drowned out their yells.

I glanced one last time over my shoulder. Di was waving both of her arms overhead, but the gelding and I crested the hill, and they disappeared from view.

I kept up the gallop until the ground became too uneven and then slowed us to a trot. When we reached the trees, I easily navigated the stout horse through the dips and turns. I wasn't following any particular path. I just wanted to get away and was in a hurry to do it.

Eventually, I slowed us to a walk, the thick trees and cool air surrounding us. We were truly miles from the ranch now and had nothing but the birds, marmots and chipmunks for company.

We kept moving, almost aimlessly. I concentrated on listening to the sounds of the gelding's hooves clopping on the forest floor and smelling fresh pine in the air. When we reached a steep ravine, I stopped. Hills climbed sharply on both sides. The only way through was straight ahead. I had no idea where it led.

For a moment, we just sat there, and tears welled in my eyes.

Since taking off on the horse, I'd managed to think about nothing at all, but now that we stood still, I wondered if Flint and Amber were together at this exact moment. Maybe one hill over from here. Or maybe, I'd passed them in my rushed gallop from the barn. For all I knew, they'd been curled up on a blanket having a picnic right in the pasture.

No! I took a deep breath. *You're just being ridiculous. Flint would never do that.*

I slid off the horse and tied his reins to a branch. He lowered his head to eat grass, and I sank to the ground beside him. The soft sound of his chews and the smell of the fresh mountain air helped. I actually started to feel better. Well, a little. It wasn't until a sharp crack from a twig sounded that my head snapped up.

What I saw made me choke.

Aaron.

He stood ten yards away, his horse behind him. He must have come from within the ravine.

"Hey, Lena," he said, walking toward me.

I bolted to standing and shifted my gaze. A scream rose in my throat when his ugly, black cloud came into focus, the pitch-black aura swirling around his shoulders.

His cloud looked even blacker than normal as it swelled and pulsed with every step he took. He'd already advanced a yard. Each step had caused his cloud to grow in diameter. I'd never seen that before, but my gut told me what it meant.

He planned to hurt me.

"What are you doing way out here?" he asked, smiling.

Instead of responding, I grabbed my horse's reins. I was never one to ignore my instincts, and I wasn't about to start now. As I leaped onto the horse's back, I knew without a doubt that Aaron had been the one to chase me that night on the gravel driveway.

Adrenaline infused speed into me. My feet still hung by the stirrups when I kicked the horse into a gallop.

Something brushed my leg.

Aaron reached for my calf, his cloud pulsing into me, but he was too late. I'd already wheeled the horse around, and we were off.

I held onto the saddle horn as if my life depended on it, which it very well may have. The gelding ran blindly down the canyon. My terror panicked the horse which I only realized when we almost skidded off an embankment around a sharp turn.

Get a grip, Lena!

I lay low against the horse, my breath labored from exertion and fear. Air whipped across my cheeks. I had to steer us several times to avoid

getting hit by a tree branch.

I dared a look behind us but didn't see Aaron. I had no idea where he was or if he was after me or not. The air whooshed past me at frightening speed.

I turned around, and my eyes widened when I realized we were headed straight for a log.

I sat up at the last second, but I wasn't fast enough.

The gelding jumped. The movement set me off balance and then air sailed around me.

Only air.

I saw the tree before I hit it. Then everything went black.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

"Lena! Lena! Can you hear me?"

The words came through a fog. My body floated as darkness surrounded me. Peaceful, beautiful darkness.

"Lena!"

I wanted to swat the annoying voice away. I didn't want to move.

"Lena! Open your eyes!"

"Here, let me try something. Move out of the way," another voice said.

Something rough rubbed on me, like a grating saw against my sternum.

"You're hurting her," the first voice growled.

"I'm testing her consciousness and she just responded to pain. Did you see it? She winced."

"Of course I saw it. Do you really think that's necessary? Don't you think she's hurt enough?" The first voice became hard, edgy almost.

I didn't know who the voices belonged to or why they were arguing. I wished they'd leave. This vacant floating place felt soothing and tranquil, yet slowly it became filled with pain.

Sharp, searing pain. Dull, throbbing pain. "Ah!" someone moaned.

"Lena? Lena! Please open your eyes, babe. Please look at me!"

Not only had pain filled my world but coldness and fear did too.

"No," someone moaned. "No!" The voice sounded pitiful. But as the pain and coldness continued, I realized that the pain was *my* pain and that the coldness was *my* coldness.

My eyelids fluttered open. Bright light instantly shone into my eyes. I flinched, drawing back.

"Dammit, Di!"

I recognized that voice. Flint.

"Her pupils react to light. That's a good sign." Something clicked and the bright light disappeared.

A heavy warm weight settled against me. A scent fluttered to my senses, one I'd recognize anywhere, and a feeling of being safe cloaked my skin.

"Flint . . ." I breathed. My eyes fluttered open again. Whatever I lay on felt cold, moist, and bumpy. The moon shone through leaves above. "Flint, where am I?"

"Lena, thank God!" Flint choked.

I'd never heard him like that. He sounded panicked, out of control, so unlike the Flint I knew. Big, warm fingers gently pushed tangled hair and leaves from my face. His gentle movements still made me wince when he touched my temple. My head pounded.

"My head hurts!" I moaned.

"I know, babe, I know."

Aaron!

A horrible fear engulfed me. Why had I thought of Aaron?

"I'm so cold," I whispered. My teeth chattered. The next thing I knew, something fuzzy and warm pressed against my skin. A blanket. Flint lifted me from the ground. I cried out in pain.

"I'm sorry, babe. We'll get you back to the ranch and then everything will be okay," Flint whispered in my ear.

I barely heard him. I was slowly falling into nothingness again, but an image appeared in my mind. Aaron in the ravine. Aaron coming after me.

"Aaron," I whispered. "Aaron . . ."

"Shh," Flint said. "Don't worry. Everything's going to be okay."

That was the last thing I heard before everything went black again.

IT WAS DAYTIME the next time I woke. Bright sunlight pierced my eyelids. Trying to get away from it, I rolled into something heavy.

I opened my eyes. It appeared I was in a bed, and the heavy thing I'd rolled into was Flint. "Hi," I managed.

"Hi. Are you hurting?" His gaze darted across my face.

"Yeah." My head pounded, and my body felt . . . broken. I didn't know how else to describe it. I coughed. "Ow, what the . . ." I grabbed my side. "My ribs really hurt."

Flint frowned. "A few are cracked."

"They are?"

"I'm going to get Di. I'll be right back."

In one of his lightning fast moves, he disappeared. The movement was so quick and agile it barely disturbed the mattress springs. I was grateful, since the little movement it *had* caused hurt my throbbing side.

A few minutes passed before Di appeared in the door frame. Flint stood behind her.

It was then I realized I wasn't in my cabin. Instead, I lay in the guy's bedroom. Their cabin was smaller than ours, just one bedroom with a queen bed and a set of bunk beds.

Jet and Jasper were nowhere to be seen. I guessed they'd slept here, though. The bunk bed sheets appeared mussed.

Di approached. Flint hovered behind her. Di kneeled by the bed and placed a bag beside her. From it, she withdrew a syringe and a vial. "Flint said you're in pain. I have pain meds."

"What are they?" I tried to lean forward. Bad idea. I winced and lay back.

"Morphine, but if that doesn't do the trick, I also have Fentanyl. We'll use these for a few days while I start you on a regimen of oxycodone and acetaminophen. Once your pain subsides enough, we'll only do oral meds."

I vaguely wondered how she got the drugs or knew how to use them. I didn't ask. I hurt too much to be curious.

With a deft movement, Di filled the syringe and the pungent smell of alcohol filled my nose. She scrubbed something sticking in my arm with an alcohol swab.

"What's that?" I asked.

"An IV. It makes it easier to administer drugs and fluids."

"But why . . ." My voice trailed off as the pain slowly subsided.

Di tossed the syringe into a plastic box in the bag. It bounced off something. I wondered what else she had in there. "Feeling better?"

"Yes." I sighed as a blissful numbing sensation filled me.

"Good." Di fingered my wrist and felt my pulse before pulling out a stethoscope and listening to my chest. "Your pulse and respirations are good."

I tried to sit up but felt so weak.

Flint was on the bed before I could blink. He easily repositioned me until I sat upright, then he fluffed the pillows behind me.

I frowned and surveyed the room again. "Why am I in your cabin?"

"Because," was the only reply I got.

Di stood from her kneeling position and began assessing me. Or at least, that's what it felt like.

She started at the top of my head and worked her way down. She looked in my mouth, flipped down my bottom eyelids, inspected my ears and felt along my jaw and neck. After that, she pulled back the covers and did everything from listening to my chest and back, to palpating my stomach and tapping her fingers all around.

Next, she asked me to move to the edge of the bed and dangle my feet. She made me do all sorts of funny things—I had to follow her finger with my eyes, flip my hands up and down on my lap, touch my nose and then touch her finger, squeeze her fingers, flex and point my toes against her hands, follow her finger with my gaze.

It almost felt like a game, but after a while, I just felt tired.

She took a few more things out of her bag, and after taking my blood pressure and temperature, she put me back into bed. I stared at her for a moment.

"Di, are you a doctor?"

She shrugged and arranged the covers around me. "I don't know, but it seems I might be. Now, tell me, what do you last remember? Do you know what happened or what day it is? And more importantly, do you know who you are and where you are?"

I frowned. "Um, yeah, I know who I am. My name's Lena, and I don't know what day it is, but I'm in the guy's cabin." Flint put his arm around my shoulders and squeezed. A grim smile covered his face.

"It's Friday today," Di said. "You went for your ride two days ago and didn't come back. Do you remember any of that?"

"Ride?" I exclaimed.

Suddenly, the dam broke loose. Running away from the ranch on the bay gelding, wandering through the mountains, stopping in the ravine, encountering Aaron, galloping away, flying off the horse. The tree.

Fear consumed me.

"Aaron . . . he . . . he followed me . . . into the mountains. I don't know how, but he . . . he tried to attack me."

A hot wave of energy rolled out of Flint. He took a few deep breaths. I could tell he was trying to control his rage.

Despite the angry emotions emitting from him, I felt nothing but safe. *Safe, I'm safe. I'm with Flint.*

A warm, relaxing feeling settled over me.

Di scowled. “I thought something like that happened. After you left the cabin, I got a vision. It was of you and Aaron in the forest. You were frightened. That’s when Jacinda and I chased after you.”

I vaguely recalled seeing them before I left the barn, but it was hard to decipher what was what. I felt so tired. Leaning forward, I rested my head between my hands, but that made my ribs ache despite the morphine so I leaned back.

“What’s wrong with me?” I asked. “Everything seems so fuzzy.”

“You have a concussion,” Di said. “From how we found you on the ground, I’m assuming you collided with that giant tree you were leaning against?”

Her words brought back a sharp memory: sailing through the air when the horse jumped and my head colliding with a tree. “I think so.”

“You were knocked unconscious,” she continued. “You’re lucky. You could have broken your neck.”

“But that doesn’t explain what happened out there.” Flint’s hot energy still poured out of him. His efforts to subdue it weren’t working. He pulled me back against him. “What did Aaron do to you?”

“He, well, nothing really.” I paused. I remembered Aaron advancing on me, but I had no idea why. “I remember riding into a ravine, getting off the horse, and then he was there.”

A picture of his ugly, black cloud entered my mind. I shuddered. “His cloud was black and pulsing when I saw him. I think he was there to hurt me.”

Heat exploded off Flint. “What? He was *there* to hurt you? He followed you out there intentionally to hurt you?”

“I think so.”

“I’m going to kill him.”

“Flint,” Di said in a stern tone. “We can’t do anything rash. Besides, he hasn’t shown up yet and considering how he chased Lena, I’d be surprised if he did.”

“What?” My head snapped toward her. I regretted the movement. “He hasn’t come back?” I rubbed my neck.

“No.” Di crossed her arms. “No one’s seen him.”

“Then where did he go?”

“Your guess is as good as mine,” Di replied.

Flint fumed silently beside me. He took a deep, steadying breath before he asked quietly, “What were you doing out there anyway?”

The memory rushed back for *why* I’d run so impulsively from the ranch. I glanced at Flint. He waited for my answer with an unreadable expression on his face. Was it because he felt guilty? Denial crushed me with its weight. *No, he wouldn’t have gone on a date with Amber.* Or had he?

“Um, I was upset,” I replied.

“About what?” He pulled me closer.

I glanced at Di. I wasn’t sure I wanted to have this conversation in front of her. Ignoring him, I said, “How’d you find me anyway?”

“Amber found you,” Di said.

“Amber?” I stiffened and pulled away from Flint.

“She followed your scent,” Di continued. “And the scent of your horse, which stood patiently waiting a few yards away from you, in case you were wondering.”

“Was everyone there or just you and Amber?” I asked.

Di shook her head. “No, Jacinda, Jet and Flint were there too. When we realized you were truly missing, we sent Val, Pete, Mica, Jasper and the other three cowboys looking for you in the opposite direction of where Amber thought you were. She was fairly certain she could track you, but we didn’t want the other cowboys or Pete and Val there. They’d ask too many questions.”

I frowned. So Amber had found me and possibly saved my life? I wasn’t sure how I felt about that. I pushed that thought aside. “How are Pete and Val?”

“Okay, now that you’ve been found,” Flint answered. He was frowning. I’d put at least six inches between us. “Pete’s had a few guests over the years go missing when they’ve wandered off. He said a guest once got seriously injured and almost died before he was found.”

I raised my eyebrows. Guilt pummeled me for putting Pete and Val through that. “And everyone else, how are they?”

“Currently, everyone’s at work,” Di replied. “Jacinda’s worried since you hit your head so hard. She and Amber are up in the kitchen while the twins and Mica are out working with Pete. The cowboys are doing their usual thing.”

I licked my lips. My mouth felt like the Sahara. “Is there any water?”

“Of course.” Di stood and left the room. With her gone, the bedroom turned into an echoing void. The silence hung. I felt Flint staring at me, but I refused to meet his gaze. A second later, Di returned.

“Here.” She handed me a large glass of water.

After I drained it, I placed it on the nightstand. The movement bumped my ribs, causing my breath to hitch.

“Ouch,” I muttered. I wanted to rub them but knew that wouldn’t do a thing. I rubbed them anyway. “How badly am I injured?”

Di’s brow furrowed. “Without an x-ray, it’s hard to say, but I believe you have a cracked rib, if not several cracked ribs, thanks to that tree you collided with.”

“So cracked but not completely broken?”

She frowned. “I’m not sure, but I think so.”

“Oh.” That didn’t sound promising. “Why didn’t you take me to the hospital?”

“No—”

“That’s right,” I said. “No hospitals. I guess it’s good you’re a doctor.”

She shrugged. “If I’m not, I know enough to help you.”

“But where’d you get all that stuff?” I nodded toward her bag.

She frowned. “Well . . . we . . . or rather . . .”

“I stole it,” Flint said.

I turned to him with wide eyes. “You *what?* How?”

“Little Raven’s outpatient clinic isn’t very hard to break into,” Flint replied.

I gaped. “But what if you get caught?”

“I didn’t leave any prints, and I only took what was needed. It won’t be obvious anything is missing. They probably won’t know until they do an inventory.”

I shook my head. This was all getting to be too much. “So you know how to break into a building?”

“It seems so,” he replied.

“And you’re a doctor?” I said to Di.

“Perhaps,” she replied.

“Yet we still have no idea *how* we know any of these things,” I finished.

“Correct,” Di said.

It was all too much. My head felt incredibly heavy. “I’m tired.”

“You will be for quite some time.” Di arranged the covers around me again. “Head injuries take a while to heal, and it’s important that you tell me if you start having uncontrollable headaches, dizziness, nausea with frequent vomiting, increased confusion . . .”

She spewed out a list of symptoms that I assumed meant my head injury was getting worse instead of better. To be honest, I only half listened. My eyelids felt like lead again. I couldn’t believe how tired I felt.

“Enough,” Flint interrupted. “She needs to sleep.”

Di smiled. Somehow, the expression didn’t seem right on her, like a badger trying to look meek. “Right, sorry. Go to sleep.”

I had no idea what time it was but felt that was good advice. I sank into the pillow and barely felt when Flint gently caressed my hair and softly kissed my cheek.

“Sleep babe, I’ll be here when you wake up,” he whispered.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Flint was indeed there when I woke up. I questioned if he moved. He still sat propped against the headboard, his long frame stretched out in front of him. Dressed in the same clothes, with a book propped on his lap, I wondered if he slept at all.

Daylight spewed through the sheer curtains. The light shone muted gray and had that dusky glow that only came with sunrise.

"Hi," I mumbled.

The book flopped to Flint's side. In a flash, he leaned over me. "You're up."

"How long did I sleep?"

He glanced at his watch. "From six last night till now. It's six in the morning. Twelve hours."

"Oh." I glanced toward the bunk beds. "Where are Jet and Jasper?"

"Working. They left half an hour ago."

I fumbled with the covers. "Excuse me, I'll be right back."

Before I could pull the covers off, he was at my side, lifting them. My movements were stiff and clumsy. I groaned when a breath sliced through my ribs like a hot knife. At least my head no longer pounded.

"Here, take these." Flint's brow furrowed. He picked up two pills from the bedside table, laid them in my palm and gave me a glass of water.

I didn't ask what they were. I guessed it was Di's regimen of pain meds. I washed them down with a quick swallow and tried to stand.

"I'll carry you."

Before he could sweep me up, I shook my head. I was surprised I beat him to it. "No, I'll walk. I'm fine."

As much as I loved the feel of his arms around me, I didn't want to be carried to the bathroom. Besides, I still didn't know how I felt about everything. For the first time since meeting him, the safe feeling he evoked didn't pacify my nerves. Was his concern genuine or out of guilt? That unreadable expression from last night flashed through my mind.

Flint frowned when I took a hesitant step. His face was masked with so much worry I actually smiled. He was like a fretting mother hen. “Flint, I’m fine.”

He just frowned further.

When I reached the bathroom, I managed to close the door without falling over or jarring my ribs. I finished my business and went to the sink. At least my toothbrush was here. While brushing my teeth, I looked in the mirror.

I wished I hadn’t.

The sight wasn’t pretty. Cuts littered my face like a bad cross-stitch. A bump on my head resembled a misshapen egg, and my hair was, well, I won’t even go there.

I lifted my shirt. An ugly, purple bruise bled across one side of my chest. I was a sight.

With less enthusiasm, I hobbled back to the bedroom.

Flint waited for me. He tried to help me into bed. I refused and dumped myself rather unceremoniously onto the mattress which only made me yelp.

“I never was very graceful,” I muttered.

“If you’d let me help you, it wouldn’t hurt.” Flint pulled the covers over me despite my protests. “Are you hungry?”

“Starving.”

“Be back in a minute.”

Of course, he was back in roughly thirty seconds. When he sat beside me, he presented me with a steaming mug of coffee and a large, warm caramel roll. My mouth watered.

“Where’d you get this?” I bit into it. Caramel oozed along my tongue. Delicious.

“Val made a pan this morning and brought them down. She knows how much you love them.”

“Yeah, they’re great,” I mumbled between bites. The doughy goodness hit the spot. When I finished, he took my plate and laid it on the table. I settled back into bed.

The silence stretched.

I’d only seen Flint’s room a few times. In general, the group rarely hung out in the guy’s cabin, and the few nights Flint and I had been together, we were outside. I chewed my lip. Had Amber seen his bedroom?

I reminded myself I still hadn't heard his side of the story.

"I've been staying here since Amber found me?" I asked.

The worry was back on Flint's face. I wasn't sure if it was from my tone or something else. Guilt maybe? I arranged the covers, refusing to meet his gaze. "Why am I not in my cabin?"

"I didn't want you away from me. Just in case—"

"Just in case Aaron came back?" I finished. My heart inadvertently raced. What if Aaron *had* caught me?

"Something like that." Flint pulled me to him. I didn't realize I was shaking until he touched me. Despite my will to put distance between us, I momentarily sank into him. Once again, my body betrayed me.

"It's stupid. He didn't do anything," I whispered.

"No, but he could have." His skin grew warmer. Energy pushed off him like the tide coming in. With each passing second, I not only relaxed but felt safer and safer, but then I thought about Amber and pushed Flint away. I still needed answers.

Flint sighed harshly and raked a hand through his hair. "Lena? What's going on? You said you rode off because you were upset. What were you upset about?"

I stared at my toes.

"Tell me. What's going on?" His voice was tight, laced with demand.

I met his gaze. I needed to see his reaction when I told him. His eyes didn't lie, not when the curtain was wide open like it was now. I took a deep breath. "It was because of you . . . and Amber."

Genuine surprise glowed in his irises. "Me and Amber?"

"She said you two were going on a date."

"What?"

"She said you two were going on a ride together, the day I went missing. Were you?"

His mouth tightened. "No, she *asked* me the previous day if I wanted to go on a ride with her, but I declined."

"You did? So she *did* lie?"

"Yes, she lied," he replied icily.

I crossed my arms tightly over my chest. Wincing, I lay them back at my sides. I didn't know what to feel. Happy that my worry had been for nothing? Or anger that Amber had made it all up?

The anger won out.

“Stupid, Amber,” I muttered darkly.

Flint, however, seemed to care less about Amber. “Lena, there’s something we need to clear up.”

“What?” I asked warily.

He tilted my chin, forcing me to look him right in the eye. “I want to get one thing straight right now. I was never with Amber, have never been with her, and have no desire to ever be with her. You got that?”

“Okay . . .”

“And I don’t know what she told you, but don’t believe any of it. Don’t believe anything she says. I’m with you and only you. You got that?”

“You are?”

He sighed harshly. “Lena, I want you to be *mine*. Don’t you see that?”

“Yours?”

“My girlfriend.”

I just stared at him.

Worry grew on his face while the energy around him increased.

I bit my lip as it suddenly dawned on me why I’d been so quick to assume Flint might change his mind about me and why I thought he may have gone on a date with Amber. “So you’re not going to start ignoring me again?”

His head snapped back. “No, never.”

“You’re sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure. I thought we cleared that up? I ignored you when we first met because I didn’t know what else to do. It was stupid. I know that now.”

I took a deep breath. He was right. We *had* cleared this up, but obviously, deep down I’d still been worried.

“Lena?” he said. “Will you?”

I finally nodded. “Okay. I’ll be your girlfriend.”

A smile spread across his face. “Good.”

“But you have to promise me one thing.”

“Anything.”

“Don’t ignore me again. Don’t ever treat me like you did before. I couldn’t bear it.”

His smile vanished. “I won’t.”

“Promise?”

“I promise.”

I let out a relieved sigh and settled against him as comfortably as I could. Deep down, I knew I should have gone to him first and asked him his side of the story. If only rational thought was my strong suit. I may have only known myself five months, but impulsiveness seemed to be my specialty.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “I should have talked to you first.”

He grunted.

I felt stupid for feeling so insecure with him, but it was as if a part of me still expected him to ignore me at any second. Like the fragile bubble we’d created around ourselves could burst at the slightest breeze.

He reached up and pushed a lock of hair from my face. “Lena, when we found you . . .” He stopped and took a deep breath. “Seeing you like that, on the ground, not moving.” He shook his head. The raw pain in his words was so evident.

“Flint . . .”

“No, let me finish. Lena, I can’t lose you. Don’t you see that? I don’t know what this is growing between us, but I have a feeling it’s something deeper than either of us can understand. And I don’t know why, but you mean everything to me. You do. You always have. From that first moment I saw you, that was it. I was yours, for as long as you’ll have me.”

I wanted to say something. My lips wouldn’t move.

“I love you,” he grumbled. “Don’t you see that?”

“You do?” I smiled slowly. “I think I love you too.”

He chuckled. “You think, huh?”

Pulling me closer, he slowly tilted my chin up. I wrapped my arms around his neck as his mouth met mine. His lips were hot, firm and he tasted so sweet.

The brief twinge in my ribs was drowned out by a hot surge of desire. I threaded my fingers through his hair, loving the feel of it. Like soft silk. I didn’t care when pain shot through my ribs again. His words sparked fireworks in my veins.

He abruptly pulled away. The magic disappeared. Everything felt empty.

“Dammit,” he muttered. “You’re going to make me forget you’re injured.”

A commotion of voices filled the hall outside the door. The first voice I recognized was Mica’s excited babble, then Jacinda’s soft voice, followed

by Di’s direct tone. When I heard Amber’s pert words, I made a face, but then remembered since she saved me, I shouldn’t be mad at her. Well, at least not for too long.

The door burst open and everyone piled inside.

“Lena!” Mica exclaimed, rushing to the bed.

Jet and Jasper shrugged apologetically. “We tried to stop her,” Jet said.

Jacinda joined Mica. The tall beauty seemed about to cry. “Oh, Little L, look at you!”

Everyone crowded around the bed. I grinned. I couldn’t help it. For the first time, I felt like I belonged somewhere and that I had a family. A real family.

I glanced at Flint. He still watched me with fire in his eyes. Love radiated inside me as Mica took my hand and began babbling about how worried she’d been. Her words poured around me, but I barely heard them. Flint’s gaze held my attention. Flint loved me. He said he always had.

I couldn’t believe I’d ever doubted him.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

As the weeks progressed, I slowly healed. Because of my injuries, we stayed on the ranch. Staying stagnant didn't matter since Di's visions kept changing. She saw us in more than one city, but rarely got a clear picture, just snippets of us in different places. It wasn't enough to act upon since nothing was consistent.

A few images repeated themselves, though. She kept seeing a desert and at one point, she thought she saw the Golden Gate Bridge, but since it was a very foggy vision, she couldn't be sure. Jet joked it probably hadn't been a foggy vision, merely actual *fog* around the bridge. Regardless, she didn't feel confident enough to move us.

To pass time as my ribs healed, I helped with research. I spent a few hours every day at the library or internet cafes in Little Raven. A few hours was all my injured brain could handle, but I did my best to search for the cities Di described. Other than San Francisco, I wasn't able to find a specific city that matched her visions.

It was frustrating to put it mildly. It didn't help that it took almost a month for my plaguing tiredness to go away. Of course, my ribs took longer. It was entirely annoying, especially since it felt like everyone catered to me. Val clucked her tongue if she saw me doing something I wasn't supposed to. Not to mention, she gave me the easy chores when I finally returned to work. Jacinda wasn't any better. She constantly tried to help me with everything. She'd even tried to dress me the first few days after I'd returned to my cabin. That was entirely mortifying.

Flint, however, was a completely different story.

From sunup to sundown, he only left my side to work. It was as though he thought Aaron would pop up at any second to finish what he'd started. No one ever did find out what happened to the deranged cowboy. His horse wandered back without him the day after he'd followed me, with no sign of him. Pete contacted the local authorities to report the incident, but since an

actual attack never happened, it got backlogged to the filing cabinet of never-seeing-the-light-of-day-again.

In other words, I'd most likely never see Aaron again, and he definitely wasn't getting arrested.

As always, the days continued despite our growing frustrations. The guest ranch closed at the end of September which lightened our workload indoors, but the workload outdoors increased. By the time mid-October rolled around, I was finally, completely whole.

It felt good to be myself again, but like everyone else in the group, I was antsy. We'd been on the ranch for over two months, yet had no idea what brought us to this region in Colorado. Sooner or later, we knew we'd have to make a decision on where to go from here. Regardless of Di's unpredictable visions, each day it became more obvious that waiting for answers was leading to nothing.

IT WAS A crisp, beautiful autumn day when everyone met in the barn for the last roundup of the season. Bitter sweetness followed. Our employment was almost done. I wasn't sure how I felt about that. In a way, this ranch was the only home I'd ever known, but at the same time, our staying put while waiting for memories to return was doing nothing but stagnating us.

It was just after eight in the morning. A nip hung in the air that hadn't been there a few weeks ago. Everyone was going out for the round-up, even Val, which Pete said only happened once a year. Their daughters: Shelby, Fiona, Haley and their families had returned home for the occasion. Apparently, it was something the Henderson daughters never missed.

"You wanna ride Coal?" Dean asked as we haltered the horses in the back pasture. Tyler led two quarter horses back to the barn, a lead rope in each hand. Mica and Jessie did the same.

"Don't you want to?" I replied.

Dean grinned. "I know it's gonna be one of your last chances to ride 'im. Unless you stay that is."

The twinkle in his eyes made me smile despite his words. Dean had hinted on and off over the past few weeks of me staying through the winter despite Flint and I being a couple.

Flint's eyes met mine when Dean and I returned with Coal in tow. The large gelding breathed heavily through his nose, his breath carrying scents

of sweet hay and grass.

"You're riding Coal?" Flint asked.

I snapped the gelding's halter into the cross ties and picked up a brush. "Yep. Dean offered."

"I'm sure he did," Flint replied.

I bit back a smile. Flint was tolerant of Dean and his persistent affections, although *tolerant* put it graciously.

Cool air flowed around us when everyone mounted. The entire Henderson family, Jacinda, Di and the twins were riding on four-wheelers, while Flint, the cowboys, Mica, Amber and I opted for horseback. Amber sat prettily on a young mare. Her horse was part thoroughbred and a beautiful black color. Together, they made a stunning pair.

We all waited for the go-ahead from Pete. Amber eyed Jasper and smiled suggestively. Mica fumed.

Amber and Jasper had formed a rather unusual relationship over the past month. The two hadn't declared they were together, yet the way they flirted, and the amount of public affection they displayed, hinted at something way beyond friendship. Amber however, didn't seem the least bit perturbed by Mica's jealousy. In fact, she seemed to revel in it.

"All right, listen up," Pete said. "We've got eighty-eight cattle to find today. With any luck, we'll have 'em all by sunset. Work together, follow your leader's instructions, and don't get lost." He said the last bit while gazing at Amber. "I'll radio Tyler when we're heading back to the barn. Let us know if you run into any trouble. We all clear?"

Everyone nodded or tipped their hats. Those on the four wheelers would take the lower parts of the ranch that weren't so hilly and full of trees. The rest of us on horseback were heading deep into the mountains.

"Tyler, did ya test your radio?" Pete asked.

Tyler was the one leading our group. "Yeah, I tested it this morning."

Pete nodded. "Keep in touch. Good luck."

Pete tipped his hat into place and climbed on his four-wheeler. The rest in his group did the same. When they drove off, Jacinda winked at me from under her hat before she raced to catch up with Haley. The two were quickly becoming friends, probably because Haley was the first person Jacinda had encountered who loved city life as much as she did.

"Ready?" Tyler asked the rest of us.

Everyone voiced agreement. Tyler reined his bay horse north and kicked him into a canter. We all squeezed our horses and followed, setting out on familiar ground.

When we reached the end of the corrals, the group slowed to a trot. It was the fastest way to cover ground without tiring the horses. The cold, crisp air swirled around. At certain angles, the wind bit into my cheeks enough to make tears sting my eyes. It was hard to believe just over a month ago, I'd worn a T-shirt.

"Think the weather will hold out?" I asked Flint. I had on thick gloves, a GoreTex jacket and fleece lined jeans.

"I think so," Flint said. "Forecast for the day is clear."

"That's a relief."

Dean rode up to my other side and smiled. "How's your ribs?"

"Good as new."

Dean smiled brighter. "I'm glad to hear it. It's good to see you on a horse again. I've missed our daily rides."

"Yeah, me too."

Dean seemed about to say something else but then glanced at Flint. "Well, see you." He nudged Giselda into a gallop and rode off.

I glanced at Flint. The scowl on his face vanished but not before I saw it. "Was that necessary?" I asked.

"What?" he said innocently.

"Scaring him off like that?"

Flint shrugged. "We compromised on this, remember? I'm okay with you two being *friends*, but it doesn't mean I have to like it."

I rolled my eyes. "I think Dean got that message when I was bed ridden and he tried to visit but wasn't allowed within five feet of me."

"Whatever are you talking about?" Flint grinned wickedly.

"You know what I'm talking about." I tried to sound stern, but a smile broke through anyway. While I was healing, Flint had stayed by my side every time Dean visited. He had also practically growled every time Dean came near me. The poor guy had felt so uncomfortable, he'd ended up sitting in a chair . . . by the door.

As the distance passed beneath us, Amber continually moved to the front of the pack. As usual, she wanted to be the center of attention. Tyler didn't seem overly perturbed, but Mica did. A scowl seemed permanently etched on Mica's face.

“Interesting crew,” Flint murmured.

“I’ll say,” I replied.

During the next hour, we wove deeper and deeper into the mountains and moved in a progressive line northwest. By mid-morning, Pete radioed Tyler to say they’d found thirteen cattle and wondered about our progress. So far, we’d only found twenty-eight. We decided to branch out more.

“Dean, you and Jessie take the southwest ridge,” Tyler instructed. “Flint and Mica—you come with me. We’ll take the north cliff. Lena and Amber, do the midline section scanning from east to west.”

Everyone murmured their agreement, but Amber plucked a hand on her hip. “I don’t want to do the midline, that’s boring. Can’t I go with you?” She pouted prettily, but for once, Tyler didn’t seem charmed.

He shook his head. “You don’t know this terrain well enough to take the cliff. Stay down here.”

She pouted further. “Why does Mica get to go but not me?”

“Because Mica’s been riding on this land for a lot longer than you,” he retorted.

At that response, Mica grinned. Amber’s nostrils flared. “Fine!” She spurred her horse and took off down the valley.

I sighed. “I guess I’ll do the babysitting today.”

Jessie shook his head. “She should have gone on a four-wheeler. We don’t have time for this.”

“Sorry, Lena, will you be okay with her?” Tyler asked.

“Yeah, don’t worry.” I glanced at Mica. She was still grinning.

“Let’s get a move on,” Dean said uneasily. “I don’t like the looks of those clouds on the horizon.”

We all turned. A wall of gray hung to the west, as if it came from out of nowhere. “I thought no snow today,” I murmured.

“There won’t be,” Tyler said confidently. “It’s supposed to stay north, but just to be safe, I want everyone to move. We don’t want to get caught in a storm.”

Everyone split up. Tyler and Mica cantered away, but Flint nudged his horse closer to mine. We were momentarily alone in the clearing.

“Be careful,” he said.

I pushed a long strand of hair out of my eyes. The wind was definitely picking up. “I will.”

Flint sat still, staring at me. I knew he hated to leave my side, especially in the mountains. “Flint, I’ll be fine,” I added softly.

He continued to stare, but eventually took a deep breath. “Okay.”

I knew it would take time for him to not feel so worried, especially since Aaron had disappeared without a trace. “You be careful too,” I added. “It’s more dangerous where you’re going versus staying around here.” I waved a hand at the sheltered valley.

He smiled and leaned away from his horse to kiss me softly on the mouth. “Love you, babe.”

As always, those words left me breathless, not to mention, wanting more. I watched him go, a flurry of man and horse thundering across the landscape. When they disappeared from view, I turned to find Amber.

There was no sign of her.

I sighed. I was supposed to be finding cattle, not some spoiled teenager. I took a deep breath. “Typical,” I muttered and nudged Coal forward.

I found her not long later. As much as Amber liked to think she was a competent cowgirl, she didn’t actually know north from south. I could tell from her expression that she was already lost.

“Lena!” she called when she saw me. Wild worry glazed her eyes. For a second, I felt sorry for her. According to Amber’s driver license, she was the youngest in our group. I believed it. Even though she turned nineteen last May, she acted a lot younger. I knew I should cut her some slack. I reminded myself that half the time she probably didn’t know any better than to act how she did. Hopefully, she’d grow out of it someday.

“Don’t worry.” I reined Coal beside her. “We just need to move west, and then turn back and go east when we reach the fence. Follow me.”

She jutted her chin out. I ignored her. With another look at the gray clouds, I knew that Tyler was right. We didn’t want to get caught in a storm. We needed to move.

It took us a while to reach the property line, but along the way we found eight more cattle. Slowly, we herded them back to the others and then moved east. The cattle we had found throughout the morning stayed in a circle and slowly, our herd grew, but we still needed to find several dozen more.

The progress was slow. I could tell that Amber wasn’t enjoying herself, but when snow flurries began to fly, the least of my concerns was

her enjoyment. We didn't have any way of talking to the others since only Tyler and Jessie had radios.

"Lena, let's go this way!" Amber turned and led her mare into the forest.

"We're supposed to go east!"

"I think I saw a cow over here!" she yelled over her shoulder.

I rolled my eyes and nudged Coal forward.

"Amber!" I called, but she kept moving and grew out of sight.

Snow flurries drifted up and down in the wind, and if I wasn't so nervous, I would have enjoyed the first snowfall. The large, coarse flakes scattered in the wind. Nothing accumulated on the ground, but I knew in the blink of an eye, that could change.

I progressed farther into the woods but still didn't see Amber. "Amber?" I yelled again.

"Lena, up here!" her voice called in the wind.

My brow furrowed. I wasn't sure which direction her voice had come from but nudged Coal forward anyway. "Do you know where she is, Coal?"

He moved a foot left, but then waited for me to tell him where to go. I didn't know what to do for a moment but then pushed him through the growing swamp of trees. It was weird. The air felt . . . different in here, as if it moved.

I shook that feeling off. That didn't make any sense.

We rode forward with no sign of Amber. What I did find were multiple *No Trespassing* signs. I was beginning to realize we'd wandered off Pete's land. I gritted my teeth and cursed Amber, but I kept going. It was either that or leave her out here to freeze to death, as tempting as that was.

Every now and then, a fresh hoof print would appear on the ground, letting me know I was still on the right track. My uneasiness, however, grew. The trees grew denser, and that strange dizzying feeling remained. I didn't recognize anything.

"Amber? Where are you?" I yelled. When I didn't get a reply, I screamed again. "Amber!"

A few minutes later, I heard her faint response. "Lena! Over here!"

I glanced over my shoulder. No sign of her. But wasn't that where she'd yelled from?

Swallowing the dread in my throat, I halted Coal. All around, the forest pressed in on me. I didn't recognize any of my surroundings. It felt as

though I'd already been riding for over an hour with no sign of her. But it couldn't have been that long—could it?

"Amber!" I yelled again.

"Lena! Over here, quick, come see!"

I wished that I had Jacinda's hearing. Being able to see a person's cloud didn't help. "I can't see you Amber!"

"Down here, I'm down here!"

It sounded as if she was moving farther and farther away. My uneasiness turned to fear. I had no idea where I was. It looked like behind me had been in front of me, but I knew that couldn't be correct because we hadn't turned. Right?

"Amber, where are you!" I screamed.

"Lena?" Amber's voice called. It was louder this time. I exhaled a breath of relief.

"Amber, *where are you*?"

"Look to your left."

I did. She stood no more than twenty feet away. Her horse was tied to a tree. *What the heck, how come I didn't see her?* My uneasiness vanished as anger took its place.

"Amber we don't have time for this! I thought you said you saw a cow —" My voice died.

A cabin, painted the color of the trees, stood dark and foreboding only ten yards away. If we hadn't been right beside it, I never would have seen it. It was camouflaged that well.

Amber excitedly ran to the side. "I found a way in over here!"

Annoyance flashed through me. "Amber, no! We don't have time for this. We need to find the rest of the cattle and get back to the barn. Haven't you noticed a storm's coming in?"

"Yeah, I know," she called. "But you've got to see this! You won't believe all the cool stuff in here!"

"That's breaking and entering."

"Come on, Lena! Just one quick look!"

"Amber." I groaned, slid off Coal and tied him beside the mare. I'd pull Amber kicking and screaming from the cabin if I had to. We didn't have time for sightseeing or trespassing. I glanced toward the northern skyline, or at least where I thought the northern skyline was, and pictured Flint. Was he safe up there?

“Lena?” Amber’s muffled voice called.

She peered through a window. Amber was already inside. She waved but then disappeared from view.

I stalked to the back of the home. Trees surrounded the cabin on all sides. A few areas around the cabin had homemade chairs and tables. Another area had rocks at just the right height for sitting. Squinting, I thought I saw something else.

My eyes widened when I spotted a small barn about twenty yards away. It was barely visible through the growing snow. Like the cabin, it was perfectly camouflaged. Around it was a small fenced enclosure. *Why would someone want a barn all the way up here?*

Maybe whoever owned this place rode their horses to access it. Turning back to the cabin, I uttered a sound of disgust. Amber had left the door open. Cold air blew inside. I walked up the porch, my steps loud on the wood planks. I inspected the lock on the front door. Triple deadbolt. There was no way she’d have been able to break into this place. That only meant one thing. The door had been unlocked.

While that didn’t surprise me, most folks in this area didn’t bother locking their properties, it didn’t add up. Why would someone leave their door unlocked yet have so many bolts in place?

I stepped inside. Once in the entryway, the wind died down and the words that were on the tip of my tongue vanished. I was speechless for a moment. The cabin was huge, much bigger than I’d thought. A large kitchen was off to the right. It was simple and rustic yet had actual appliances. Cabinets lined the walls and a table that could seat ten sat in the middle. The entire room was clean. I stepped closer and slid my finger along the counter. No dust.

Frowning, I walked to the sink. My eyes widened when I saw a bowl in it. Milk and a few bits of cereal floated in the dish. It wasn’t rancid smelling and no mold was present. My heart stopped. That only meant one thing.

Someone, today or very recently, had been here. Probably the person who lived here.

I raced from the sink and yelled for Amber. “Amber! Get down here, now! This place isn’t abandoned!”

“Lena, come see!”

I stalked across the wood floors into a living area. The living room held three, large sofas with plump cushions. Several tables and chairs lined the windows.

Each table had board games on them. On the far wall, by the massive fireplace, spread an entire wall of shelves. Rows and rows of books covered them. I tried not to pry but couldn't help but notice the titles.

There were classics and current fiction, but also non-fiction. Textbooks lined the entire bottom row: math, science, history, art, astronomy, physics . . . The list appeared to go on for the entire length.

As much as I knew we needed to leave, curiosity won. Pulling one out, I lifted the stiff cover. The edition date was within the last five years.

I flipped through the pages. Handwritten notes filled the margins. Whoever this belonged to he, or she, had read the entire thing. I carefully put it back.

"Lena, would you get up here!" Amber called.

I spun around to see her at the top of a ladder. The cabin was two stories. To the side of the living room, a ladder climbed up to a loft area. Amber waited at the top.

"There are bedrooms up here!" she cried.

"Amber, we really need to go." My annoyance flared again. "Somebody lives here! Don't you see that?"

Of course, she ignored me.

I stomped up the ladder. On the second floor, there was a short hallway. Several doors lay on either side. I walked to the first. It held a bedroom. It was small, only holding a single bed and desk. A lone window revealed snow flying outside.

"Amber?" I turned away. The second room held three beds, also single beds, like the first room, but this room was decorated. Hand drawn pictures of machines, solar systems, chemical structures and landscapes hung on the walls. They were intricately drawn. Whoever had done them had taken their time.

"Lena, I found something!" Amber called.

I fled from the room to the last door in the hallway. As I rushed in, I unconsciously realized it was the biggest room of the three. Two sets of bunk beds, and one single bed lined the walls along with two big dressers. There were also two desks and a large shelf of books.

Amber sat in the middle of the floor and paged through a notebook. There were pages and pages of animal drawings. Horses, birds, mountain lions, wolves, otters, bears, it was an endless collection.

“This entire notebook is full of them!” she said, smiling. Her cowboy hat sat to the side, and her legs were curled daintily underneath her. It seemed for all intentions she had settled in for the afternoon.

“Amber, we need to go,” I said sharply. “There’s a blizzard brewing outside, and this isn’t our place. Somebody lives here and could be back any minute. Get up! We’re leaving!”

“But look at this,” Amber exclaimed and jumped up. She walked to the shelf and pulled out a book. At first, I thought it was an old folder of some kind, but when she opened it—it held a variety of fashion magazines.

“These are all from last year,” Amber stated. “Whoever lived here, or lives here,” she said when she saw my expression, “must keep up on current stuff.”

“That’s nice, but we have to go.” I walked to the window. Snow flew everywhere. My stomach sank. How were we supposed to find our way out?

“We really need to go. This blizzard is getting worse. So, put everything back and—”

Amber was gone. The drawings lay scattered on the floor.

“Amber!” I hurried out of the room and searched the other two bedrooms. No sign of her. When I got to the ladder, I could easily see that she wasn’t in the living room. I almost tripped in my haste to get down. I yelled again.

No answer.

Cursing, I walked back into the kitchen and then back to the living room. There were other rooms. Doors lined the back of the living area. There had to be more rooms on the first floor. I raced to them and began opening the doors one by one.

The first was a closet. The second held a full bathroom. So this cabin had running water. Surprising. I closed the door and moved onto the next.

The third door held a stairwell.

My mouth dropped. Inky blackness greeted me. “Amber?” The sound echoed in the dark void.

I fumbled on the wall and found a light switch. Amazingly, it hummed to life when I switched it on. So this cabin had power too. The light

revealed smooth concrete stairs and concrete walls. At the bottom was another hallway, but I couldn’t see where it led. It was shadowed in inky darkness.

I glanced over my shoulder, but still didn’t see Amber.

“I’m going to kill her,” I whispered and took the first step.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

I slowly descended, my footsteps echoing in the stairwell. The air grew colder and colder. When I reached the bottom, another door stood to the left. The solid door felt heavy when I turned the handle. It opened with a rush of stale air.

The second the door swung open, a light flicked on.

I stared at the small room, my confusion growing. Concrete walls enclosed the tiny space. A single, modern light hung above. Along each side of the room lay benches. Several hooks on the walls, above the benches, held white suits.

Frowning, I stepped closer and felt one. I lifted a sleeve. Each had a hood with a plastic face shield.

“Biohazard suits?” I whispered incredulously. What the heck would someone have these for?

Under the benches, cubbies held boots, latex gloves, and masks. At the end of the small room, another door waited, no more than eight feet from me.

Breathing shallowly, I stepped closer. The door had a window, but whatever lay on the other side stayed hidden in darkness.

My chest rose and fell painfully fast. I reached out, grasped the door handle and tried to turn it. It wouldn’t budge. I then noticed the password-protected key pad off to the right.

“How odd,” I murmured.

But my jarring the door triggered something. Lights flooded the barricaded room. My mouth dropped as I stepped closer to the glass and peered inside.

“What the hell . . .” I stared into the room, too stunned to move.

“Lena?”

“Amber!” I whirled away from the window and raced back up the stairs.

Amber stood just outside the last door, the fourth one, the one I hadn't had a chance to open yet.

"Come see this." Her voice shook.

"Amber! What are you doing?" I raced into the room, my eyes wide with panic.

Amber stood in what appeared to be an office. Papers were strewn everywhere. When my gaze rose to her face, my anger and confusion vanished. Tears shimmered in her luminous eyes.

She held up papers with shaking hands. "Look. These were lying here."

I took a tentative step closer. Amber gave me the papers and then balled her fists to her mouth. A soft wail escaped her.

I leafed through the papers' contents, my eyes widening with every page, my chest rising and falling faster with each new sheet. "No!" I whispered. "How can this be?"

Amber whimpered as tears rolled down her face. "What does it mean?"

I shook my head. Between this and the room downstairs, I didn't know what to think of this place. It certainly wasn't a vacation retreat.

"I don't know, but we need to get out of here!" I folded the papers and stuffed them in my pocket. "Come on." I clamped ahold of her wrist.

I dragged Amber through the cabin and out the back door. A part of me half expected someone to appear, as if we were being watched, or followed. An image of the cereal bowl flashed through my mind.

Once outside, I propelled Amber to the horses. I hurriedly brushed snow from our saddles, my movements jerky. Already, an inch of white powder sat on the ground.

The feeling of being watched grew. I didn't know if it was my imagination going crazy, or if it was a valid concern. For a second, a buried image of Aaron surfaced in my mind. I shuddered, forcing the memory down.

I mounted Coal and heard a soft wail. Amber stood by my side, crying. "Amber," I said sharply. "Get on your horse!"

She just cried harder.

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. In a softer tone, I said, "Amber, honey, we need to go. Just untie your mare and we'll meet the

others.” I held my breath, not sure what she’d do, but then with stiff movements, she mounted her horse.

“Good. Now, follow me.” I led us back into the woods, but after a few minutes realized I didn’t know which way we’d come from. I swiveled around in my seat.

Amber followed right behind, her eyes wide. I glanced to my left, right and then straight ahead. Snow fell all around. I wasn’t sure where to go.

“Are we lost?”

I shook my head. “No, we’ll find our way back.”

I nudged Coal forward. Flurries flew everywhere. The farther we traveled from the cabin, the safer I felt, which didn’t make any sense, since it had probably dropped another ten degrees. At least the cabin would provide shelter. We weren’t dressed or prepared for winter weather.

Coal’s huge hooves made deep imprints in the snow. He calmly waited for me to guide him. I floundered. I didn’t know where we were, and I was all turned around. I had no idea which way was north, south, east or west. Frantically, I looked up, but the vast gray ceiling above offered little help.

“You don’t know how to get out of here, do you?” Amber asked.

I answered honestly. “No, I don’t. I don’t know where we are.”

Panic filled her face.

We both stood there, and for the first time since we left the group, I felt the gravity of our situation. We were deep in the mountains, at high altitude, with no protection other than our jackets. We had no way to find the ranch, and a blizzard was brewing.

“What should we do?” I asked.

She shook her head. Tears sprang into her eyes. “I don’t know!”

“I guess we keep walking forward.” Maybe we could find a stream. That’s what Dean said to do if I got lost. I swallowed and turned around before nudging Coal again. We walked farther but I felt convinced we had moved deeper into the forest. Once again, I stopped.

“I’m sorry, Amber,” I called loudly over the wind. “I don’t know what to do.”

“Neither do I!” she wailed. We both stared at each other. I reached out and grabbed her hand as snow flew around. As our fingers wrapped around each other’s, Amber’s gaze snapped wide open. “Wait! I do know what to do!”

“You do?”

“Or, at least I think I do,” she replied. I had no idea what she was talking about, but instead of telling me her plan, she closed her eyes and lifted her head. She sniffed the air and then exhaled deeply before sniffing again. Her eyes flashed open. “This way.”

She nudged her mare forward. I followed.

We meandered through the forest, the sky darkening while more and more snow fell. I had no idea how long we walked. It seemed not only direction, but time, became jumbled in this part of the forest, but each time I felt certain we were more lost, Amber lifted her nose and smelled the air.

“Are you sure you know where we’re going?”

She didn’t answer. Deep concentration lined her face. I continued to follow, not at all convinced we’d find our way out, but eventually, the trees thinned. Thirty yards after that, an opening appeared. Out of nowhere, I spotted a cow. As we got closer, the entire herd appeared. I’d never been so happy to see anything in my life.

“Amber, you did it!” I exclaimed.

Her eyes snapped open. A triumphant grin broke across her face. “It worked!”

“How’d you do it?”

She smiled. “I followed their scent.” She nodded toward the cattle. “They have a strong stench.”

I almost hugged her, but then realized I’d probably fall off Coal so settled for grinning happily.

“Lena!” Flint’s voice called in the distance. A figure galloped toward us from across the snow ridden field. “There you are!” he called when he got closer.

The rest of the group huddled together at the edge of the herd, about a hundred yards away.

“Where have you been?” he demanded. He stopped his huffing mount inches from mine. His eyes were dark and wild. I wondered how long they’d been waiting.

“Searching for cows.” I knew now was not the time to bring up the cabin, or the papers . . . or the basement. I gave Amber a hard look so she’d keep her mouth shut.

Flint glanced toward the forest we’d emerged from. “Did you come out of *there?”* His eyes grew even crazier. “Lena, do you know what that is?”

I shook my head. From Amber's frightened expression, I guessed she didn't either.

"Those are the Forbidden Hills! Are you crazy? What made you go in there?" Flint cried.

I eyed Amber. "I don't know, but we're fine. We made it out."

Flint took his hat off and raked a hand through his hair. "Come on. We need to get down. The snow's coming in too fast."

Guilt followed me down the mountain. The panic in Flint's gaze, and the way he stayed close to my side for the entire ride back, told me he'd been more than worried. He still seemed panicked, even though I rode beside him.

Of course, I didn't tell him that his worry was valid. If Amber hadn't been able to sniff our way out of the Forbidden Hills, we'd no doubt still be there, maybe forever. I shuddered.

The wind howled around us. The sky was darker than midnight. "Let's get the horses cleaned off. When you're done, go to the main house," Tyler instructed as the barn's lights came into view.

"So much for no snow," Dean said with a forced smile. I knew he'd been worried too. When he'd seen me and Amber ride up with Flint, a look of huge relief had crossed his face.

I slid off Coal. The papers in my pocket crinkled. I stuffed them deeper into my jeans. "We better get these horses unsaddled."

Everyone groomed and blanketed their horses before putting them into stalls. One of the cowboys mixed together hot bran mash which each horse readily inhaled.

My feet sank into the snow with each step back to the house. Flint kept his hand firmly locked around mine the entire way. At the main house, Val had hot cocoa, coffee, tea and cinnamon rolls waiting. From the other smells coming from the kitchen, I guessed there'd be a huge feast for supper.

"You all took your time," Jacinda commented when I walked into the large living room. She sipped a cup of tea while lounging on one of the huge sofas. Di sat across from her, reading a book. Haley sat on the end chair, reading an issue of *Vogue*.

"How'd it go?" Di asked.

"We got all of them," I said, referring to the cattle. I hung my wet jacket beside the roaring fire. The heat coming off it felt so good. I held up

my cool fingertips.

"Where are the guys?" Jacinda asked.

"In the mudroom."

The guys and Mica were still discussing the cattle with Pete, and Amber was in the kitchen chatting nervously to Val and her other daughters.

I eyed Haley. When she caught me watching her, she smiled. I forced a smile back before I caught Di and Jacinda's attention. I nodded stiffly to the door. *I need to talk to you*, I mouthed.

Di frowned and stood. So did Jacinda. They followed me into the hall. No one was around.

"We need to have a meeting, *now*," I said in hushed tones.

"Why?" Di asked.

"We just do. Can you gather everyone?"

"Yes." She spun on her heel and disappeared.

Jacinda and I hurried back to our cabin, the wind biting into us. Everyone else followed. When Jet entered our tiny living room, he closed the door behind him.

"This better be good." He dusted snow from his jacket. "Pete just pulled out the whiskey."

I gave an exasperated sigh. "It is."

"Well?" Di crossed her arms and tapped her foot. Her eyes practically gleamed.

I pulled the papers from my pocket. "Look."

Holding them out, I let everyone see what was on them. Drawn in intricate detail were all of the symbols tattooed on our wrists.

The symbols of the solar system.

DI SNATCHED THE papers from my hands. "Where did you get these?"

I eyed Amber. "Do you want to explain or should I?"

"I will." Amber held her head higher. "Let's all sit."

Everyone pulled the chairs and couches into our familiar circle and then Amber launched into a tale. She told the story of how we'd been searching for cattle. About how we'd broken away from the group and then wandered into the Forbidden Hills because she had a *feeling* something was in there. I rolled my eyes at her exaggerations while Jet and Jasper's mouths

actually dropped. Amber remained oblivious. I wondered if she knew about the reputation those hills had. Probably not.

When she got to the part about the cabin, everyone grew silent.

“So you found these papers in that cabin?” Di finally said. She held them in her hands and studied them closer. An aggrieved expression settled on her face. “I don’t understand. What does it *mean?* That whoever owns that cabin knows about us?”

“Maybe,” I replied.

She passed the papers around so everyone could see them better. Each sheet held a hand drawn picture of a planet from our solar system. Someone had painstakingly etched each one in pencil, along with a detailed description about what the planet consisted of. It was all done in tiny, precise writing. The amount of information was staggering. The planet’s description was written in a neat column beside the picture. It included the planet’s size, mass, atmosphere, what its core was made of, its distance from the sun, its revolution and rotation time, and other tidbits that were unique to each celestial body.

But it wasn’t the writing or pictures that caused everyone’s eyes to widen. It was the symbols drawn in the middle of each planet. The symbols tattooed on our inner wrists. Jacinda’s face whitened when she saw her tattoo in the middle of Uranus.

“So these are planetary symbols?” she finally said.

Flint nodded. “Di and I knew that. This isn’t new information, but the fact that whoever lives in that cabin had these drawings is suspicious. Definitely suspicious.”

Jacinda clasped her hands tightly together.

Di’s brow furrowed and a sound of frustration emitted from her throat. “I didn’t *see* any of this coming. Why is that?”

Mica shrugged. “You can’t see everything.”

Di still didn’t look happy. She leafed through all of the papers again. “My symbol is Venus.”

“And I’m Mars,” said Flint.

“Earth,” I chipped in.

“Mica’s Neptune, Amber’s Mercury, and Jacinda’s Uranus,” Di said.

“And we’re Jupiter and Saturn,” Jasper commented, nudging his brother.

“So what does this mean?” Di set the papers in her lap.

“That we’re aliens from these planets?” Jet said.

I almost slugged him in the shoulder. “Serious answers only please.”

“But we could be.” Jet’s eyes gleamed. “I mean think about it. We could have—”

“No.” Di held up her hand. “Just read the descriptions on these planets. No humans can inhabit these places. And we’re all *human*.”

“But do we actually know that?” Jet said.

Di sighed. “Yes.”

“What this could mean, is that the cabin you found is part of our pasts,” Flint said. “Either that or the owner has an obsessive interest in astronomy.”

I thought about Flint’s and my backyard astronomy hobby. I then thought about the bedrooms with the three beds in one and five in the other, and the animal drawings and fashion magazines.

“I’d bet money that cabin is part of our pasts.” I frowned, thinking about the room in the basement. I still hadn’t told anyone about it. I wasn’t sure I liked that room being a part of *anyone’s* past.

“There’s more,” I said.

Di stood and put her hands on her hips. “There is?”

“There was this room, in the basement.” I paused. “It was . . . unusual.”

Amber eyed me, her gaze questioning.

“What kind of room?” Di asked.

“I’m not sure exactly. It looked like a laboratory.”

“Seriously?” Jet said.

“Seriously,” I replied.

“We should go back,” Mica said. “And check it out.”

“Yes, we should go back,” Di agreed, “but will we be able to find it? The Forbidden Hills are notorious for people getting disoriented in—right?”

Amber’s eyes lit up. “I can find it. The cabin had a unique smell. I think I can track it.” The twins grinned. Mica actually cheered.

“Wait,” I said as everyone’s excitement grew. “Someone lives there.”

“What?” Di spun toward me. “Someone *lives* there?”

I described the cereal bowl. “Someone has been there recently. At least in the last day or two.”

Di pursed her lips and paced a few times. “Why would someone live there?” She tapped a finger to her mouth. “I didn’t think anybody lived in

the Forbidden Hills."

"Well, if you're our alien master you might," Jet said.

"Here we go again," Mica muttered.

"Do you think whoever was there knows us?" Amber asked.

"It's possible," Di said.

"So when do we go back?" Jasper asked.

Di paced again. She stopped and put her hands on her hips. "Right after supper. Since Pete and Val are expecting us back, we need to have dinner with them. If we don't, they'll look for us. We don't want to risk anyone following us."

"Let's head back to the main house now," Flint said. "We'll tell everyone goodnight after we eat, say that we're tired and turning in. With the blizzard, nobody's going to be out. They won't know we're gone."

Di nodded tightly. "Let's go."

Everyone stood to leave. In a hurry, Di bumped into Jasper. The bump made her lose hold of the papers. They fluttered to the floor. "Damn," she murmured.

She reached down to collect them. They lay scattered in a half circle. I stared at the symbols. My eyes widened. I scanned them again and stopped her from picking them up.

"Wait! Just hold on a minute." My eyes darted back and forth across the symbols. A second ticked by. Then another. I raced into my bedroom.

The room was a mess. Between Mica, Amber and I, clothes were everywhere. "Dammit!" I reached down and fumbled through everything. My backpack had to be in here somewhere.

Flint appeared at my side. "What are you looking for?"

"My backpack."

I didn't need to say anything else. He whipped into action. A blurred second later, my backpack was in my hands.

"Thank you."

He just nodded. "What did you think of?"

I unzipped the bag and pulled out my map. I fingered the rough paper. I'd never actually used it. In fact, I'd never even opened it, since, in the end, the instinct had led me entirely on its own. I'd bought it nonetheless before leaving Rapid City, just in case.

"Follow me," I replied.

We joined everyone back in the living room. I unfolded the map on the floor and stared at it. “Has anyone thought about where we woke up?” I asked excitedly. “About the cities we woke up in?”

Di rolled her eyes. “Of course. Flint and I have looked at them from every angle. What states they were in, the names of the cities, how they were spelled, if they had similar histories, population sizes, demographics. Everything. But we couldn’t find a connection.”

“Yeah, but did anyone look at them on a *map?*” I asked.

Di glanced at Flint. He hunkered down at my side.

“No,” Di said grimly.

I flattened the map more. “Maybe there’s some kind of connection with where we woke up and these symbols.”

Di kneeled at my side. Lines of highways, interstates and outlines of the forty-eight states lay before us. “Does anyone have a pen or something I can write with?” I asked.

Flint rushed from the room and returned two seconds later with a ballpoint. I grasped the pen and scanned the map, circling the cities as I went. “Okay, Rapid City, South Dakota; Yellowstone National Park; Salt Lake City, Utah; Las Vegas, Nevada; Phoenix, Arizona; El Paso, Texas; Lubbock, Texas; Wichita, Kansas.”

I studied the dots. Reaching down, I drew an imperfect circle, connecting all eight cities. I grinned.

Jacinda leaned forward. She studied it for a few seconds. Her eyes widened. “It all goes in order.”

Di frowned, assessing the cities again.

Jacinda’s eyes glowed excitedly. “Lena woke up in Rapid City. You woke up in Wichita, Di. Amber woke in Lubbock, Mica in El Paso, me in Phoenix, Jet in Las Vegas, Jasper in Salt Lake and Flint in Yellowstone!” Her voice grew more animated with each second.

“You see it too!” I cried.

Di’s eyes widened. “Our tattoos! Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars, Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune.”

“They go in order with our cities and tattoos,” Flint stated.

“Yes! My tattoo—the symbol for Earth is Rapid City. That’s just northeast of Yellowstone, where you woke up, Flint, and just northwest of Wichita, the city you woke in, Di. Venus, Earth, Mars—our three cities sit

on the circle in correlation with our tattoos. Just the order they correlate with in our solar system."

"Yes!" Di studied the map. "It's too uncanny to be a coincidence."

"They do almost fall in a perfect circle with each other." Jasper eyed the map.

"Yeah, it's pretty close," Jet agreed.

"It's too much of a coincidence," Di stated. "These have to be clues."

"And at the center of it all, is *exactly* where we are." I pointed at the center of the circle. It was near Little Raven.

"Which is probably why we were drawn here," Flint murmured.

"But we haven't found anything," Jacinda said. "If we are where we're supposed to be, how come we don't know anything?"

"Because we're not *exactly* where we're supposed to be, just close to it," I replied.

"Are you thinking what I'm thinking?" Flint's energy grew. A steady push pulsed into me.

I nodded. "It's not just Little Raven and this ranch that are near the center of the circle. That cabin is too."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

We hurried through supper. I'm sure everyone noticed our strained conversations and inhaled eating. Luckily, since the Henderson daughters and their families were here, Pete and Val had others to capture their attention. The cowboys, however, all eyed us curiously. Especially Dean. I avoided his questioning glances as the eight of us threw our coats back on and trudged out the door.

Once back in our living room, Di wasted no time issuing orders. "Everyone get their warmest clothes on. We'll also need flashlights and a crowbar. If whoever lives there isn't back, I'm breaking into that lab."

We all flew into action.

I eyed Amber as she and I finished getting dressed in our room. A sliver of fear snaked through me.

"Are you sure you can find it?" I asked. We walked out of the room to join everyone else. For a moment, Amber's brow furrowed, and she bit her lip.

"Do you know what will happen if you *don't* find it and we get lost in the Forbidden Hills?" I hissed.

Jacinda flashed us a worried look but pretended she hadn't heard my questions.

Amber jutted her chin out, a determined expression growing on her face. "I'll find it."

IT WAS A cold, dark ride back into the hills. Bitingly frigid wind stung my face. Nothing but white flew around. The snow was already six inches deep which made for slippery footing. The horses didn't seem fazed, but I gripped my legs tightly around Coal as we climbed the hills behind the barn.

When we finally reached the Forbidden Hills, a dark mass of nothingness stood in front of us. My toes were mostly numb, and I was pretty sure my cheeks were red from the cold. I could practically feel

Amber’s nervousness, but once again, she closed her eyes and slowly nudged her mare ahead.

We followed her deeper and deeper into the trees. Moving in a single file line, we kept each horse nose to butt so we wouldn’t lose track of anyone. Every now and then, we did a count. Everyone had to state their name and where they were in the group so no one got lost.

As I ducked my head at the last minute to avoid a tree branch, I figured that the chances of us losing each other were slim despite the dark night. With all of us together, our gifts made us quite formidable.

After another solid hour of riding, maybe more, maybe less—it was hard to tell in this forest, the cabin appeared. It was like before. It was so well blended into the landscape and designed in such a way as to not draw attention that I would have walked right past it if Amber hadn’t stopped us.

Dim moonlight filtered through the clouds. We all stopped and circled around. Everyone stared at the vacant windows. Mica jumped to the ground and ran to the porch. I, however, didn’t feel nearly as excited. The room in the basement flashed through my mind.

In the night, with snow flying, there was just enough light to see the old, wooden siding which was painted to mimic leaves and trees. It was eerie and ominous looking, as though someone had a secret hidden deep within this place. A secret someone didn’t want anyone to find.

I briefly wondered if whoever lived here had built this cabin or simply fixed it up. Perhaps this house had been around for a hundred years, but then I remembered the concrete foundation. It couldn’t be that old.

“So, this is it.” Di’s voice was quiet, yet eager, and snapped me out of my reverie.

We corralled the horses in the small barn. From there, Amber led us to the cabin door. Inside, Flint whipped around the house at lightning speed until every light was switched on.

“I take it no one’s here?” Di asked when he returned.

He shook his head. “It’s empty.”

I returned to the kitchen. The cereal bowl still sat there. Someone *had* been there. The evidence lay right in front of me. I joined the others as they all stared, but they seemed afraid to move anything, as if everything would evaporate with the slightest touch.

“Does anyone remember *anything* about this place?” Di asked.

Everyone shook their heads.

“Show me the basement,” Di said.

I took a deep breath. The group followed me downstairs. Coldness grew as we descended. Everyone gazed in puzzlement at the strange suits at the bottom.

“Why would these be needed?” Mica picked up a sleeve.

I shrugged. “Maybe things can’t get contaminated in there.” I nodded toward the other room.

Di walked to the door with the window, but it still wouldn’t budge when she tried the handle.

“It’s password protected.” I pointed to the keypad.

She tapped her fingers against it and frowned. Similar to earlier, light flooded the room on the other side. I guessed it had movement sensors. Di stared inside when the room was completely lit.

“Unbelievable,” she murmured.

Everyone else moved to take a turn at the window. One by one, we all stared wide-eyed.

On the other side of the door, was a huge modern lab. It was one large room with rows and rows of counter space. On the counters were beakers, petri dishes, shelving and endless amounts of machinery. Several cabinets looked like refrigerators or freezers and held jars and dishes of different liquids and solids. They were a variety of colors. I once again stared in amazement. I didn’t know what any of it was.

Di whirled around. “There’s no way we can get in there?”

“Not unless you break the window,” Flint said.

“Good luck,” I murmured. I didn’t know why, but I had a feeling it was bullet proof.

“Come on.” Flint put his arm around his sister’s shoulders. “Let’s look at the rest of the house.” She grudgingly let him pull her away.

We spent the next several hours filtering through everything. For a split second, I felt guilty about that, but my need to find answers took precedence. If this place could answer what happened to us, I’d turn it inside out if need be.

Flint stayed with me while we dug through drawers and scrolled through bookshelves. Jacinda and Mica spent most of their time in the biggest bedroom with all of the bunks, while Amber, Jet and Jasper stayed in the other bedrooms and living room.

Di, on the other hand, became obsessed with the lab. She returned to the door and spent the entire time trying different numerical passwords. Of course, none of them worked. The crowbar didn't help either. The door wouldn't budge.

"It doesn't make any sense," I complained to Flint. We stood in the living room, going through books. I pulled out a text on the history of ancient Europe. The cover showed a picture of a decaying castle. I studied it before putting it back on the shelf. "If this place *does* hold something in our pasts, why don't we remember it? Surely something would trigger a memory in one of us?"

A lock of chestnut hair fell across his forehead. He was kneeling at the bottom shelf and put away a memoir from a Civil War veteran. "Yeah, you'd think one of us would remember something."

By the early hours in the morning, we all came to the conclusion that there was nothing left for us to find. While there were endless books to read, drawings to admire, games to play and lab doors to bang our heads against, the general consensus was that there was nothing else that alluded to our identities.

"At least, we know about the symbols and the connection to our cities," Mica said as we stepped onto the porch. Cold wind greeted us. We walked to the horses who sat huddled together.

Luckily, Amber didn't have any problems navigating us back to the clearing, although we all agreed that our senses were completely upside down and inside out in the Forbidden Hills. I could see why they were called that. It was as if time stood still and space took on its own dimension. If I hadn't been surrounded by everyone, I probably would have freaked.

By the time we reached the barn, tended to the horses and made it back to the cabin, a good eight inches of snow sat on the ground. I was mostly frozen. The clock chimed five in the morning, and the space heaters were turned on full blast when we all collapsed, exhausted onto the couches.

"There's got to be another clue!" Di's dark eyes were almost wild. The cool, composed Di I'd always known had vanished. "We're just not seeing it!"

Jet shook his head and rested back in his chair. "Di, there was nothing else at that cabin. No names on any books, no initials on any drawings, no papers stating the deed of ownership . . . there was nothing. What do you expect us to come up with?"

“Yeah,” Jasper agreed. Amber sleepily nodded from the crook of his shoulder.

“We should go to bed. Everyone’s too tired to think of anything.” Jacinda yawned, but Di held firm. She insisted we stay up until something revealed itself.

Consequently, all of our eyes were bloodshot and gritty by the time the sun rose. It was only when I dozed off in Flint’s lap that he gently nudged me awake. Without a word, he carried me to bed. Flint’s obvious disregard for Di’s manic request was enough for everyone to follow suit.

“Come back!” she yelled. “We just need to think harder!” The sounds of doors opening and closing as the others wandered off to bed was the only response she got.

“You okay?” Flint whispered when he lifted me to my bunk.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I mumbled sleepily. “You?”

“Yeah. Sorry about Di. She can be rather hard headed when something gets in her mind.”

I smiled. “Sounds like her brother.”

He chuckled and kissed me softly on the lips. When I pulled him in for a deeper kiss, he growled. Amber had fallen asleep with Jasper on the couch. Mica was currently in the bathroom. In other words, we were alone.

“I assumed you were too tired for that,” he said.

“I’m never too tired for that. Besides, it’s been too long.” Since my accident, we’d managed to get away from the group a few times, but each time was hurried and quick since one of us had to work or someone was expecting us somewhere. Every time, we kissed and touched, and while clothes came off we’d never had sex. Birth control was not something we had. Hence, mounting frustrations.

“In that case . . .” he murmured.

A whoosh of air and he was on top of me. I pulled him eagerly into another kiss as he pushed my shirt up. Cool air washed over my abdomen. My nipples hardened which caused a murmur of appreciation from him. Since we had no idea when Mica would be back, it was another hurried moment where we explored one another as fast as we could while making sure to keep most of our clothes on in case someone burst through the door. I could feel Flint’s desire. Once again, raw, hot energy poured off him. His need consumed me, making me long for him even more as the familiar ache grew between my thighs.

When voices sounded outside the room, Flint pulled back. I huffed in annoyance and smoothed my shirt back in place.

“Are they coming in?” I asked quietly.

“Not sure.”

It sounded like the twins but eventually the voices passed. They’d obviously moved on.

Flint sighed harshly. “I need to get you alone, in a hotel, for a week, before I’m going to feel like I’ve had enough of you.”

He climbed off the bunk. Bringing up his forearms, he rested them on the frame. I admired their deep, tawny color and the way his muscles rippled beneath them.

“Only a week?” I teased, tracing a finger along his skin.

“Minimum of a week, and that’s just to work out the initial frustration.”

“That sounds better,” I mumbled sleepily, my eyes closing. “Count me in.”

He was kissing me softly when Mica entered. Wet hair dripped down her back as she clutched a towel around her. An annoyed grumble was her greeting before she stalked to her dresser. Flint took the hint.

“Goodnight,” he whispered and disappeared out the door.

PETE WOKE US around lunchtime. He didn’t comment that it was past twelve and all of us were either in bed or sprawled on the furniture. Well, except for Di.

I stumbled out to the living room when I heard the commotion. Bright sunlight streamed into the room. Pete stood by the door, his hat in his hands. A light dusting of snow covered the floor around him. Di stood by the window, staring out into a sea of white. I wasn’t sure if she had let Pete in or not. She seemed almost catatonic.

Amber yawned and rubbed her eyes. Jasper sat beside her on the couch, doing the same. Jacinda was the only one presentable. In a long silk nightgown with her hair perfectly styled, she stood at the small kitchenette making coffee. I could only imagine what I looked like. The stray snarls of hair curling around my face resembled a poorly constructed beehive.

Fresh scents of coffee soon filled the air. Pete cleared his throat. “Well, the reason I came down was to make sure all of ya were all right. And also to let ya know the girls are takin’ off today.” Pete addressed Jacinda.

“Haley’s gotta get back to work and Shelby and Fiona need to get their boys back to school. Haley was hopin’ to see ya before she left.”

Jacinda smiled. “Of course. I’ll get dressed and be right up.”

Pete turned and tucked his cap back on his head. Warm air flowed through the door when he opened it. It had to be at least fifty degrees. It seemed the freak blizzard weather had ended.

I watched through the window as he trudged up the drive. At least a foot of snow sat on the ground. The entire outdoors blazed brightly, like a white frosted quilt had settled over the landscape. It was so bright it actually hurt my eyes.

Squinting, I turned to the bathroom only to see the door close. Jacinda had beat me to it. In other words, I wouldn’t be getting in there for at least an hour.

“Did you sleep last night?” I asked Di.

She still stood at the window, not moving. I had to ask her again before she turned.

“Oh, yeah, a little,” she replied quietly.

With crossed arms, she continued gazing out the window. A slamming door from somewhere outside sounded. A moment later, Flint and Jet appeared through the window, walking in the snow toward our cabin. Flint hadn’t bothered with a jacket. Clad in only a T-shirt and jeans, he trudged through the snow. Tawny forearms and broad shoulders made my pulse quicken. I made myself take a deep breath.

They entered without knocking. Another warm breeze trailed inside.

“Morning,” Flint said to everyone.

Jet pointed at the clock. “I believe the technical term is *afternoon*.”

Flint ignored him and glanced at Di. With a furrowed brow, Flint approached me. “Hi.” He leaned down and kissed me softly on the mouth.

My hands clenched his T-shirt as he pulled away.

“Sleep okay?” he asked.

“Yeah, but coffee still sounds good.”

In lightning fast moves, he poured cups for everyone. It was a miracle it didn’t spill, although the liquid did slosh a few times.

“Di?” Flint nodded toward the bedroom she shared with Jacinda. “Can I speak with you?”

She followed him mutely. I sipped my coffee, watching them disappear behind the closed door. I had a fairly good idea what they were talking

about.

The cabin.

WE JOINED THE Henderson family and cowboys for a late lunch. Tears were shed and lots of hugs went all around when Pete and Val's daughters left with their families. When the last vehicle drove down the driveway, we all waved.

"When will they be back?" Jacinda asked. Her long hair flowed around her shoulders in the warm breeze.

"For Thanksgiving and Christmas," Pete replied. "We're fortunate to have all our girls close. The McCormacks, they own the ranch west of here, only see their kids once a year if they're lucky. Their kids have all gone and moved outta state."

Flint put his arm around me. I settled against him as thoughts of our families and beginnings once again sneaked to the front of my mind. The cabin in the Forbidden Hills held something in our pasts. I was sure of it. Now, it was just a matter of finding out what.

"I've got coffee and tea brewing," Val said. "Let's all move back inside." She bustled everyone to the front door.

As soon as the door closed behind us, Flint nodded in the direction Pete had gone. Before I could ask what was going on, he and Di left the entryway. The rest of us were still kicking snow off our boots.

"When's our last day here?" Mica asked. She hung her jacket on the coat rack.

"Tomorrow." I slipped out of my boots and did my best to avoid the wet puddles on the floor.

"Already?" she replied incredulously.

"Yep." With the last roundup done, our seasonal employment had come to an end. Pete had hinted a few times about keeping two or three of us through the winter. Dean's eyes had alighted on me each time that subject came up. So far, none of us had responded to those hints. We couldn't be split up. Now, however, with our finding the cabin so close to Pete's land, I wasn't sure what we'd do. Maybe it would make more sense for some of us to stay working so we'd have a way to venture there more often.

"Mmm," Mica said. "You smell that? Val's cooking something."

She trailed off to the kitchen. Jacinda, Amber, the twins and I followed.

An hour later, we were all sitting around the kitchen table playing cards when Di and Flint finally reappeared with Pete. The cowboys had joined in our game. I was losing badly. Apparently, I didn't know a thing about poker.

Tyler added a five dollar bill to the pot. Jasper sighed and folded.

I glanced away from the game. Pete held out his hand to shake Di's hand and then Flint's. "We'll sure miss all of you. You've been a great help. I'm not sure what Val and I would have done without ya."

"We appreciated the opportunity," Di replied. "It made for an interesting break in our travels."

I frowned as those words sank in. *We're leaving?*

Dean tensed beside me, his ears perked toward the conversation. I knew Flint had noticed how closely Dean sat beside me. Flint's energy slowly pushed toward the table.

"We'll pack tonight and head out tomorrow morning." Flint crossed his arms. My eyes glued to his strong forearms.

Val wiped her hands on her apron. "It's a pity to see you all go. We've really loved having you."

Mica, Jacinda, Amber, the twins and I all glanced at one another. If we were leaving tonight, how would we make trips to the cabin?

"SO WHAT'S THE plan, Captain?" Jet asked as we walked through drifts of melting snow.

"We pack when we get back and clear out in the morning," Di replied.

"And go where?" Mica asked.

Di strode purposefully forward. "The cabin. Someone was there and that place holds answers. Therefore, that's where we'll be staying until whoever owns it shows up again."

"But how are we going to get there?" Jasper asked. "It takes hours on horseback and come tomorrow morning, we won't have any horses to borrow."

Di glanced at Flint. "We'll hike there."

"*Hike* there?" Jacinda almost stumbled but caught herself just in time. "As in *walk?* On foot?"

"That's generally what hiking means." Jet clapped her on the back.

“What about all of our stuff?” Amber asked. We reached the cabins and everyone stomped snow on the porch steps before piling into the living room.

“We don’t have that much stuff,” Di said. “What we do have, we’ll take with us.”

“So we’re hiking *and* carrying our bags.” Jacinda fluffed her hair after taking off her jacket. “I certainly hope we don’t do this more than once.”

“Like Di said, we’ll stay at the cabin until whoever lives there shows up again,” Flint replied. His hair stood out on all ends when he took his hat off. It looked funny and sexy at the same time.

Jacinda huffed. “My suitcase won’t be easy to carry.”

“I’ll carry it,” Flint replied. “And whatever else everyone isn’t able to carry themselves.”

“Ah, to have the superman gene.” Jet sighed. He sat down on the couch, his broad shoulders widening as he settled his arms over the couch back. “And all I got was *The Voice*.”

Jasper brought his hand to his chest. “I’m touched at your regard for our special gift, brother.”

Jet snorted a laugh.

“Let’s pack.” Di put her hands on her hips. “I told Pete we’d also clean these cabins from top to bottom.”

Jacinda sighed. “In other words, we have a lot of work to do.”

WE SAID OUR goodbyes the next morning. Tears stung my eyes when I hugged Pete and Val. I had no idea our departure would affect me like it did, but in a way, saying goodbye to Hideaway Hills was like saying goodbye to the only identity I’d ever known. Even though I still knew nothing past six months ago, here on this ranch, I’d become someone.

Dean knew me as the girl who enjoyed horseback rides through the hills. Val as the worker who was always happy to help. Pete as the girl who eagerly greeted the guests and joined in the group activities.

Prior to coming here, I’d been a lost, homeless girl on the streets, desperately searching for answers that I had no way of finding. But now, I had an identity, at least a new one, and I clung to that the way a drowning person clings to a raft.

“We’ll sure miss you.” Val wiped tears from her cheeks and hugged me fiercely.

I hugged her back and blinked rapidly. “I’ll miss you too.”

The sun warmed my back as we stood on the porch. Humming from the Suburban, as it idled in the driveway, intermingled with the rustling from our jackets as we hugged everyone goodbye. The cowboys shuffled their feet, hands in their pockets. When I approached Dean, a fleeting look of sadness passed across his face before he covered it with a grin.

“So you’re leaving us after all,” he said.

I felt Flint watching us, but I reached out and hugged Dean tightly. Despite Flint’s jealousy, the cowboy had been a true friend to me. I wouldn’t forget that. Dean’s arms wrapped around me as he pulled me into his warm embrace.

“Take care and tell Coal I’ll miss him,” I said in muffled words into his shoulder.

Dean’s arms tightened. Scents of hay, horse and sweat surrounded me. “I will.” He paused yet he didn’t seem in a hurry to let me go. “I’m gonna miss ya, Lena.” His voice was gruff.

“I’ll miss you too.”

When I pulled back, I glanced self-consciously at Flint. He stood at the edge of the porch, watching us. An unreadable expression covered his face. I could feel his possessiveness in the energy that rolled off him, but he didn’t make a move to stop me and Dean. Love swelled in my chest. I knew Flint hated the closeness Dean and I shared, yet he’d never asked me to stop talking to Dean or stop seeing him. He put up with it because he knew I cared for the cowboy.

“You take care, ya hear?” Dean said. He cleared his throat and stuffed his hands in his pockets.

“I will. You too.”

By the time we all piled in the Suburban and waved our last goodbyes, it was mid-morning. Everyone was quiet as Di drove down the driveway.

Our one security disappeared behind us like a dream upon waking. We drove ahead, not stopping, not looking back. I could only hope the hidden cabin in the Forbidden Hills held the answers we so desperately craved.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

We drove from the ranch to a remote area in the National Forest and parked off an old logging road. From what Di and Flint had been able to piece together on the map, it was the closest area to the hidden cabin in the Forbidden Hills. At least, where we thought the cabin was.

That didn't mean it was close. Flint guessed it was at least a twenty mile trek through the mountains, and from the topography on the map, the going wouldn't be easy. I just hoped we'd find it.

When we stepped out of the Suburban, fresh pine scents and singing birds surrounded us. Melting snow dripped from the trees, the occasional drips sounding on the forest floor.

"Forecast is for warm weather all week," Jasper said. "With any luck, this snow will be gone in a few days."

"And then we'll have mud to hike in." Jacinda sighed. "How lovely."

Mica double knotted her boots and slung her pack over her shoulders. Between the eight of us, we carried enough food for a week.

"Let's get a move on," Di said. "With any luck, we'll get there by sundown."

THE HIKE THROUGH the forest was pleasant for the first couple hours. I wasn't used to carrying a heavy pack, but I didn't mind it as I got caught up in the sounds and feel of the forest. Slushy snow crunched underfoot while our quiet breathing puffed around us amidst the singing birds and scampering chipmunks.

It was mid-afternoon when we entered the Forbidden Hills. I knew when it happened. That funny feeling again took hold, as if time stood still and everything felt upside down. I now understood why scientists traveled from around the world to study this area. In a way, it felt as though we'd stepped into another dimension.

"I wish I had a camera," Mica said at one point in the afternoon. Flint walked ahead of her. Between the backpacks he carried on his back and

chest, and the two huge suitcases he carried in each hand, it did look rather impressive.

"You really don't get tired?" she asked him. He'd been walking like that all day, not once complaining.

Flint shrugged. The movement should have been awkward, considering what he carried, but he managed to make it look graceful and easy. "Not really."

"Are we there yet?" Jacinda huffed. She stopped and braced a hand against a tree. Her chest rose with each breath. We'd been hiking for over two hours since we stopped for lunch yet I had a feeling we'd be lucky if we were halfway there.

Jet clapped her on the back. "Nope. Not even close."

She glared at him which only got a laugh out of the twin.

If it weren't for Flint and Amber, I'm not sure if we'd have made it to the cabin. Amber tracked the cabin's scent, keeping us from getting lost in the crazy hills. While Flint carried the heavy bags as if they weighed nothing at all.

By the time Amber found the hidden home, the sun had mostly fallen, and I was more than ready for the hike to be over. My legs ached in a way that reminded me of my homeless days when I'd walked for miles and miles if I wasn't able to get a ride. A sharp twinge plagued my side, and my shoulders felt stiff.

I grinned in relief when the trees thinned and the camouflaged cabin appeared. Amber stopped sniffing.

"Finally," she said.

Jasper hugged her. "I knew you'd find it."

Jacinda, however, collapsed against a rock and let out a loud sigh. "I . . . never . . . want . . . to do . . . that again," she said in between breaths.

I bit back a smile but couldn't stop my muffled laugh. Jet laughed too and then Jasper joined in. Before long, we were all laughing as packs fell from our shoulders and shoes flew off. Nobody seemed to care when muddy, slushy snow squished between our toes. In a way, it felt good and refreshing. It soothed my swollen feet.

"No lights are on," Di commented after our laughter finally died down.

"Looks just like it did when we left it," Jasper replied.

"Let's get inside." Di shrugged off her pack. "I don't know about the rest of you, but I'm starving."

THE CABIN INDEED looked the same since we'd left. The cereal bowl still sat in the sink, only now the milk smelled curdled and bits of film stuck to the sides. Jacinda rinsed it out and cleaned it before putting it with the rest of the dishes.

Nobody said much as we ate a simple meal and got ready for bed. The long hike and tearful morning seemed to take its toll. I could barely keep my eyes open when we climbed the ladder for bed. The guys went to the room with the three beds while the five of us went to the larger bedroom. It wasn't until all of us pulled back sheets and burrowed under the covers that I realized something.

"We all just climbed into a bed as if we knew exactly which one was ours," I said.

I lay on the top bunk. Mica had the one beneath me. Across from us were Di and Jacinda. Amber was in the single.

"You're right." Di's dark eyebrows drew together. "All the more reason to stay here until the owner returns. Maybe we've slept here before."

I buried myself under the warm blankets while moonlight filtered through the curtain. Had this been my bed once? Had I lived here at one point? It was frustrating yet exhilarating. Once again, it was as if my body remembered something my mind could not. I knew this bedroom. I knew this cabin. Only for some reason, my mind couldn't remember.

THE NEXT TWO days, nothing happened. We hung out at the cabin and jumped every time we heard the slightest sound. Each time it would only be a tree scraping against the house or a bird landing on the roof. Not the cabin's inhabitant.

To pass time, we played games, read books and hung out outside. In a way, it felt as if we were at a secluded retreat. However, there was nothing relaxing about waiting for the cabin's mysterious owner to return. At times, it felt as though I'd jump right out of my skin I was so anxious.

"Do you want to go for a walk?" Flint asked.

We sat outside on the porch step. I'd been tapping my foot nervously and only stopped when I realized what I was doing.

"Yes!" I jumped up. Sitting around was killing me.

"I'll tell the others we're leaving in case we get lost." Flint sprinted inside and returned with a device in his hand.

"What's that?" I asked.

“A GPS I found. We’ll see if it works.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

“I asked Amber to find us if we haven’t returned within an hour.”

We set out through the trees. It had to be mid-morning by now. It felt good to move again. I was still stiff from our arduous hike to the cabin. Exercise was exactly what I needed.

Warm, autumn air swirled around. Temps in the fifties had melted most of the snow. Only the shaded areas held traces of the October blizzard.

“Do you hear that?” I asked as we tromped through the trees.

Flint cocked his head. “Hear what?”

“It sounds like a helicopter.”

Flint shrugged. “It’s probably a rancher rounding up the last of his livestock.”

We carried on. I slowly relaxed into the hike. “What are we going to do when we run out of food?”

“Amber and I will hike out, and whoever else wants to come, to do a grocery run.”

“I bet Jacinda will go.”

Flint chuckled and held up a branch so it wouldn’t hit me in the face. “She does seem to love hiking.”

We meandered through the trees, and despite the crazy feelings these hills evoked, I didn’t feel fear. In a way, it felt like home. My breathing relaxed into a steady pace, my legs moved steadily beneath me. Flint and I soon fell into easy banter.

It wasn’t until we stepped into a small clearing that I stopped short. All happiness and tranquility the hike created—vanished.

An older man walked toward us, his head down, a device in front of him that he seemed to be studying intently. Before I could say two words, Flint grabbed me and flew us behind a rock. We hunkered down, our breathing heavy.

“Do you know who he is?” I whispered.

Flint shook his head, his mouth tight.

I straightened just enough to see over the rock. The man continued to walk toward us, his head still down. He didn’t seem to know we were there. I switched my vision. His cloud appeared, and my mouth fell open.

“What is it?” Flint asked. His energy pulsed into me.

I didn’t answer. Instead, I watched, mesmerized by the cloud flowing around the older man’s shoulders. It was . . . strange. I didn’t know how else to describe it. A rainbow of very faint colors danced and flowed above his body. Red, violet, magenta, green, indigo, pink, gold, orange, silver, navy, yellow. The list went on.

At least twenty colors intermingled in his cloud. All of those colors were faint, like they’d been washed out in a spring rain. The oddest part, however, were the two *bright* colors in the faint rainbow: blue and pale green. Those two bright colors, mixed with the fainter ones, made it the most beautiful cloud I’d ever seen. It was also the most perplexing aura I’d encountered.

I switched my vision back to normal and rapidly assessed everything else about him. The man looked ahead now. I frowned and tried to remember or recognize something about him. He had a normal face, from what I could see of it. Sharp hazel eyes stared straight ahead. Deep wrinkles lined the corners of his eyes. Gray hair covered his head, slightly wispy at the top. He moved quickly and strongly.

From the gray hair and wrinkles, he had to be in his fifties or sixties. For all intents and purposes, he looked like somebody’s grandfather. Harmless, benign, your average normal older man, albeit fitter than most.

My frown stayed put. I knew he was anything but normal.

“Lena,” Flint hissed quietly. “What’s wrong?” His energy pushed into me again.

The man stopped. His head cocked as if listening. I frowned. There was no way he could have heard Flint. He was still ten yards away.

“He’s different,” I whispered.

The man turned in our direction. His gaze scanned the trees.

I hunkered back behind the rock. Was it a coincidence that a man with a rainbow cloud was walking in the Forbidden Hills? It didn’t take a rocket scientist to know it wasn’t.

I stepped out from behind the rock before Flint could stop me. “Hello,” I called.

The older man’s eyes widened. “Galena!”

Galena?

The man dropped the device he was carrying and hurried to me. I again marveled at how swiftly and easily he moved. Dressed in tan hiking pants, sturdy boots and a lightweight jacket, he looked like a hiker out for a

stroll, yet he was here, in the Forbidden Hills. Nobody hiked in the Forbidden Hills.

Before he could get within ten feet of me, Flint blocked him. I peeked around Flint's side since his broad back was about six inches from my face. The man had stopped, his eyes widening even more.

"Flint!" the man breathed.

Flint's shoulders tensed. Hot, raw energy poured off him. "How do you know my name?"

The older man's gaze swung around the clearing, worry lines deepening his wrinkles. "What about the others? Are they here too?"

"What others?" Flint said through clenched teeth.

"Diamond, Jacinth, Mica, Amber, Jet and Jasper. Are they here too? Are you all together?" The man stumbled over his words. Despite my heart hammering, I wanted to reach out and comfort him. He seemed so worried.

"How do you know our names?" Flint asked tightly.

The man took a deep breath and then another. "Of course," he said. "I'm sorry. You have no idea who I am."

An image of the cereal bowl flashed through my mind. The bowl that someone had eaten from the other day. I switched my vision again and watched the beautiful cloud surrounding the older man's shoulders.

I knew without a doubt that we'd just found the owner of the mysterious cabin.

"I'M NOT ASKING again," Flint said. "How do you know our names?"

The older gentleman shook his head. He took a few more deep breaths, as if composing himself. When finished, he held out his hand. "Let me introduce myself first. My name's Conroy Fielding, or Dr. Fielding to some, but I prefer Conroy."

Flint arms stayed at his side.

Conroy dropped his hand. "I've known you all for a long time. That's how I know your names."

I squeezed Flint's arm and tried to push him aside. He didn't budge. If anything, he stepped farther in front of me. His body felt like a hot rock, hard as stone, yet brimming inside with fire. I sighed and sidestepped him. I knew he was suspicious of this man, but his cloud was similar to ours. I didn't think Conroy would hurt us.

“You’ve known us for a long time?” I asked.

“Yes.” Conroy glanced around again. “Now please, tell me. Is everyone else with you? Are all eight of you together?” His tone sounded so worried. “Please, tell me. I promise to explain everything.”

Flint’s jaw clenched. I put a hand on his arm.

“Yes,” I replied. “We’re all together. Everyone else is back at a cabin we found. I’m guessing it’s your cabin?”

Conroy sighed, his shoulders relaxing. “Yes. I own the cabin.”

“Are you going to explain now?” Flint said through gritted teeth. “You still haven’t said how you know us.”

“Yes. Yes, of course. This must be very confusing.” Conroy walked back to his device to retrieve it. “Let’s go back to the cabin and I’ll explain everything to all of you.” He began walking and waved us to join him.

I pulled at Flint. He didn’t budge. “Flint, his cloud’s like ours,” I whispered.

That got a raised eyebrow. “It is?”

“Yes, please let’s go.”

Conroy stopped when we didn’t follow him. He watched us with worried eyes.

“Please, Flint. He’s not going to harm us. I feel fairly certain of that.”

Flint’s energy continued to roll off him. “Okay, but stay behind me.”

We followed Conroy through the woods. None of us said a thing. A few times, I wanted to ask Conroy about how his gadget worked. It didn’t look like a normal GPS, but I kept my mouth shut. From the hot energy rolling off Flint, I knew small talk wasn’t something he’d appreciate.

When we approached the cabin, I spotted Di and Jacinda. Both were seated on the porch. They jumped to standing when they saw us.

Conroy smiled, another relieved sigh escaping him. “Diamond, Jacinth.”

Diamond? Jacinth? That’s what he’d said before when he named us.

Di glanced at Flint, a questioning look in her gaze while Jacinda merely cocked an eyebrow. “Do you know this guy?” Di asked.

Flint shook his head. “No, but he seems to know us.”

Di tensed. “Who are you?”

Conroy didn’t reply. “Where are Amber, Mica and the twins?” A worried expression again appeared on his face. He seemed constantly concerned for our whereabouts despite me telling him we were all together.

“Probably inside,” I replied.

Di shot me a look.

I shrugged. “I think he’s harmless.” I inched closer to her and whispered, “His cloud’s like ours.”

Di frowned suspiciously. “Who are you?” she asked again.

The strange man held out his hand. “Dr. Conroy Fielding.”

Di merely stared at him.

Jacinda studied Conroy curiously just as Amber, Mica and the twins barreled through the door.

“I just beat these three at cribbage!” Mica exclaimed. “And I’m thirty dollars richer for—” her words died when she saw Conroy. “Oh, hello,” she said.

Conroy smiled, a relieved expression on his face. “It’s good to see you all well.”

“Okay, you’ve got to stop that,” Di said, although her voice wasn’t quite as stern. “Who are you really? Not just your name. Tell us now.”

“You’re right,” Conroy said. “I’m sorry. I know you don’t remember me, so this is probably very confusing. Let’s go inside, and I’ll explain.”

Di turned stiffly. The rest of us followed.

We entered the cabin. Scents from breakfast lingered in the kitchen. Dirty dishes lined the counters. Conroy didn’t seem fazed that we’d made ourselves at home.

When everyone was in the living room, we all sat. “Okay, tell us who you are,” Di demanded.

Conroy sat near the fireplace. “Like I said, my name is Dr. Conroy Fielding. I’m a biomedical researcher. I used to work for O’Brien Pharmaceuticals.”

We all stared.

“And that’s supposed to mean something?” Jet said dryly.

“I’ll start at the beginning,” Conroy said.

Jacinda clasped her hands and leaned forward. “Please do.”

“I’ve known all of you since you were young children.” Conroy addressed Di. “We found you and your brother,” he nodded toward Flint, “when you were around eighteen months old, and Flint was about two and a half. Your mother never knew when we took you. She’d leave you by yourself for days at a time.”

Di’s head snapped back. Neither she nor Flint had time to respond before Conroy turned to Jacinda.

“We took you and Galena when you were around eighteen months, and Galena a few months old. The next day, your mother died from a drug overdose.”

Jacinda and I glanced at one another, both of us frowning. Took us? Our *mother*?

“Jacinda and I are sisters?” I blurted.

“Yes, partly,” Conroy replied. “Same mother but different fathers, so technically you’re half-sisters.”

“And you, Mica,” Conroy said. “You were maybe seven months old, your mother a prostitute, afflicted with horrible mental illness and addicted to meth. And the twins,” Conroy said to Jet and Jasper. “You were both around twelve months, often left for days by your mother without anything to eat or drink. And lastly, Amber. You were just a month old when we took you from an alleyway. You were frequently left there when your mother worked. She was a homeless prostitute and would do anything for her next hit. Once, she tried to sell you.”

Amber’s mouth dropped.

“So, that’s how it all began,” Conroy continued. “When you were infants or small children, O’Brien Pharmaceuticals stole you from the monstrous homes you were born into. We rescued you from parents who abused you horribly and cared more about their next hit than their own child.”

“You kidnapped us?” Jasper said.

“Yes,” Conroy replied. “Our job was to locate children in different areas of the U.S. who were born into horribly abusive circumstances. From there, we transferred you to O’Brien Pharmaceuticals. We called you the lost children.”

Lost Children?

“But why would you do that?” Amber asked.

“To experiment on you,” Conroy said.

A few of us gasped.

Mica crossed her arms and leaned away from him. “Why would you experiment on us?”

Conroy hung his head. “I can’t believe I ever thought anything good would come from what we did.”

“Which was?” Mica raised her eyebrows.

“I used to belong to a powerful group that conducted legitimate business in the pharmaceutical world. We also had a secret division that very few in O’Brien Pharmaceuticals knew about.” Conroy shook his head. Guilt laced his words. “Our group decided thirty years ago to experiment on children. The ultimate goal was to create a drug that resulted in the perfect specimen. A perfect human being. One capable of so much more than nature created. At the time, I dreamed of endless possibilities. Drugs that would give us the ability to cure blindness and deafness, while also enhancing aspects of the brain that controlled strength and speed, or tapping into dormant areas of the mind we do not use. Areas that create psychic connections. It was incredibly powerful.” He paused. A pained expression crossed his features. “Ultimately, however, this group was not what I expected. When it became apparent that the experiments would be undertaken at all costs, I got out. And I took all eight of you with me.”

My mouth dropped. Was this guy serious? We were taken from parents who didn’t care if we lived or died, and then brought to some drug company that experimented on us like lab rats? It seemed too monstrous and entirely too preposterous to believe.

“Is that why we can do special things?” Amber asked.

“Yes,” Conroy replied. “Our drugs gave you your abilities.”

“Is this a joke?” Jet said.

Conroy shook his head. “I wish it were.”

At least a full minute passed in which no one said a thing. My heart pounded. We were drugged? *Kidnapped?* Some pharmaceutical company gave us these abilities?

My head spun. It couldn’t be true.

“Do you have proof you did this?” Di broke the quiet. “How do we know we can believe you?”

“No, I don’t have proof,” Conroy replied. “I understand if you don’t believe me.”

“But how could something like that happen?” Jasper demanded. “How can you steal kids off the streets and experiment on them? Surely, *someone* looked for us after you took us? If not our parents, than the authorities or child services? Wouldn’t someone catch you?”

Conroy shook his head. “Sadly, no. Part of the reason you were all chosen was because we knew nobody would ever look for you. All of you

were born at home, if you can call filthy apartments or under bridges, homes. None of you have birth certificates. None of you have social security numbers. None of you exist according to the U.S. government. No trace of you will ever be found in a Social Service database, because the only people who ever knew you existed were your mothers and fathers, and all of them are long dead."

"You're saying that our parents never contacted the authorities after we went missing?" Di said. Disbelief lined her words.

"That's right," Conroy replied.

It seemed everyone else was processing this faster than me. I was still trying to get my head around Jacinda and me being sisters, and that all of us had once had families, real relations. Although, I'm not sure family would be the right term if what Conroy said was true. Families protected one another. I had no idea where that moral came from, but I felt it to my inner core. However, according to Conroy, our blood families did everything but protect us.

"How do you know our parents never looked for us?" Mica asked.

"We monitored all police activity. And one parent, Jacinth and Galena's mother, died from an overdose before she knew we took you. Since your fathers were never in your lives, there was nobody to contact the authorities in your case."

Coldness swept through me. Had my mother really cared so little for me?

Flint put his hand on my thigh. He'd been suspiciously quiet. "How do you know her mother died?"

"Surveillance. We needed to make sure our group wasn't compromised."

"But how do you know *all* of our parents are dead?" Amber asked.

"Again, surveillance," Conroy replied. "We followed them all until their deaths."

"But why would you ever do such a thing in the first place?" Jacinda demanded. "To take children and experiment on them . . . That's horrific!"

"I know," Conroy said quietly. "Believe me, I know that now. However, at the time, I truly believed we were giving you a better life full of gifts and abilities, but I mistook the ambition of my colleagues. It was too late to stop them by the time I realized their intentions."

“What were their intentions?” Flint asked. Power rolled off him. It was hot, but I inched closer to him anyway. My body felt chilled.

Conroy’s gaze clouded over. “To experiment on you at all costs.”

Mica swallowed audibly. “What costs?”

“To the death.”

My eyes widened.

A heavy sigh raised Conroy’s shoulders. He wouldn’t meet our questioning gazes. “Originally, there were three groups of ten children. However, two children in your group died. They were too old when I administered their drug. That’s why there are only eight of you now.”

Jacinda gasped. “They *died* because of what you did to them?”

Conroy gave the barest hint of a nod. “We didn’t know then that over the age of three, the human brain is too developed to adapt to the alterations the drugs demanded. Those older than three usually died from encephalopathy. If I had known that would happen, I *never* would have done it.”

Silence followed that revelation. All I could do was stare.

“That’s why you took us from our mothers and fathers when we were so young,” Di said quietly.

“Yes.” Tears clouded Conroy’s eyes. He blinked them back and cleared his throat. In a shaky voice, he said, “If I could take back everything I did . . .” He paused. “I can’t undo what I’ve done, and I can’t take back the contributions I’ve given to O’Brien, but I *can* try to make it right. That’s why I took all of you away from there many years ago. If I’d been able to take the other two groups, I would have, but transporting eight children as it was without being detected was almost impossible.”

“Where did you take us?” Amber asked. Her voice was so small and frightened. Jasper tightened his grip around her.

“Here, to this cabin,” Conroy answered.

I remembered last night. How we’d all climbed into beds as if we knew which one was ours.

“I’d heard about the Forbidden Hills and how people rarely ventured into them,” Conroy explained. “It seemed like the perfect place to hide, so I bought this land and had this cabin built specifically for us. We all lived here together in hiding until six months ago.”

“We did?” Mica exclaimed.

“Yes.” Conroy nodded. “It was too risky to live in the normal world. O’Brien has searched for us since we disappeared over fifteen years ago. Hiding was our only option.”

“Fifteen years?” I gaped. “We lived in this cabin in hiding for fifteen *years*?”

“Yes, it was the only safe option.”

“How old were we when you took us from O’Brien?” I asked.

“You were five, Galena. And you, Flint.” Conroy’s gaze shifted. “You were eight. Being the oldest in the group, you had the hardest time adjusting. You had seen and been through so much by the time I got you out of there.”

Flint stared at Conroy, not saying a word. His energy, however, picked up a notch.

“How old are we now?” I asked.

“Your ages? You’re twenty-one, Galena, and Flint you’re twenty-four. Diamond, Jacinth and the twins you’re all twenty-three, Mica you’re twenty-one but will be twenty-two next month, and Amber you’re nineteen. You’re the youngest in the group.”

So the ages on the driver licenses were correct. However, I’d never had a license. I’d never known my age. Until now.

I’m twenty-one.

A huge sense of relief flowed through me. I had no idea how much not knowing my age had bothered me until that very moment.

Jasper leaned forward, his brow furrowed. “But *why* can’t we remember any of this? How come everything past six months ago is blank?”

“Because my drug failed,” Conroy said.

“Your drug?” Amber’s head cocked.

Conroy nodded. “Did you use your tattoos to find this place?”

Amber’s eyes widened. “You know about our tattoos too?”

“Yes. I tattooed them on all of you—six months ago, just in case.”

Confused expressions sprouted on all of our faces. “Just in case what?” Di asked.

“In case my plan failed,” Conroy replied. “Tell me, how did you all meet one another?” A keen interest lit his eyes.

“We all woke up in various cities but inevitably felt a pull to this area,” Di said. “After several weeks to months, everyone arrived in Colorado in

more or less the same place. I was able to see everyone and pull us together."

"So you all eventually arrived close to this cabin?" Conroy asked.

"Yes," Di replied.

"Yet none of you remembered your identities or that you once lived here?"

Di nodded. "Correct."

Conroy leaned back. "So your identities never returned, but something in your subconscious was triggered that led you back here." He paused. "I knew it was possible the drug wouldn't work, that memories might surface or something could trigger your subconscious. The fact that you're all here verifies that's exactly what happened. How interesting."

"Really?" Flint cut in. His energy grew hot again. "You call that interesting? Eight people left on their own in unfamiliar cities with no sense of who they are, and you call that *interesting?*"

Jacinda leaned forward and clasped her hands. "You keep mentioning a drug, Conroy. What drug are you referring to?"

Guilt flashed across Conroy's eyes. He wouldn't meet our gazes when he said quietly, "The drug I administered to all of you six months ago. The drug that made you forget."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

"You drugged us?" Jet gaped. *"Again?"*

I thought about the lab downstairs. Conroy's lab? Where he created this drug?

"I know that sounds awful, but it was the only way I could see a safe future for all of you," Conroy said. "You have to understand, with Amber being nineteen you were all well into adulthood. And over the years, all of you voiced wanting to leave to start a real life. Only a few of you," he eyed Di and Flint, "were content to stay living in hiding. The rest of you wanted to live in and explore the world. But it was too dangerous to let you leave together. I knew I'd have to find a way to make it safe. After all, what right did I have to keep you any longer? And there was an incident last year, that made me reconsider staying—"

"But why drug us?" Flint interjected. "What was so dangerous that made you do that?"

Fear entered Conroy's eyes. "O'Brien."

Jacinda's eyes widened. "What do you mean?"

"They're still looking for you. If O'Brien ever spotted one of you, you'd unwittingly lead them to the others. I couldn't let that happen."

"What would they do if they found us?" I asked hesitantly.

"I honestly don't know," Conroy said. "I'm not sure I want to know."

"So you drugged us so we wouldn't remember each other and then you split us up?" Di said. "And you did all of this simply so we could live in the normal world?"

"Yes," Conroy replied. "Individually, you stood a better chance at not drawing attention. Even if one of you was spotted, there's no way you'd be able to lead them to the others if you couldn't remember anything. Especially, if you didn't know one another existed."

I leaned into Flint. "Which is why you took our memories away."

"Yes, it was the safest option I had."

"Did we agree to be drugged and split up?" Flint asked.

“You never would have agreed to be split up. You’re family, even though you’re not related,” Conroy replied quietly.

Flint’s grip tightened on my thigh. “So you obviously didn’t ask our permission before you drugged us again.” His jaw clenched. Once again, heat and that powerful feeling rolled off him.

Conroy clasped his hands together. “No.”

“I didn’t think so.” Flint put his arm around my shoulders, pulling me closely to him. “So I suppose you don’t know that something went wrong with whatever you did to Lena. She was homeless in Rapid City. Did you know that? That she had to hitch rides to Colorado when she felt the urge to return to this place?”

Conroy’s head whipped up. “Homeless? But how? I gave you all money and homes.”

“Well, you must have forgotten Lena,” Flint seethed. “She had nothing.”

Conroy shook his head. “No, no I didn’t. She was left in her condo, just like the rest of you.”

“That’s not where she woke up,” Flint persisted.

“Where did you wake up?” Anxiety laced Conroy’s words.

“An alleyway, outside,” I replied.

“Without anything, except the clothes on her back,” Flint added.

A horrified expression crossed Conroy’s features.

“So that wasn’t where I was supposed to wake up?”

“No!” Conroy exclaimed. “I never would have left you somewhere like that. Never!”

“Then why did she wake up there?” Flint demanded, his voice tight. “Another one of your experiments failed?”

Conroy shook his head, appearing lost in thought for a minute. “The only explanation I have is that you sleepwalked out of your condo. You have a history of sleepwalking, Galena. That’s the only way I can explain it. You must have left your home in your sleep, and since you didn’t know it existed, you wouldn’t have known to return to it.” He covered his face with his hands. He looked almost sick. “No wonder I was never able to track you.”

“You tracked us?” Di asked.

“Yes, with the cell phones I left all of you. I was able to follow all of you until your signals abruptly vanished. From the directions you were

moving, I knew most of you were coming back here."

Di eyed Flint. "We were right." She glanced back at Conroy. "We destroyed them. We knew it was a way to be tracked."

Conroy smiled humorlessly. "Then I taught you well."

I was still reeling that I'd sleepwalked out of the home I'd owned in South Dakota. I thought about all of the times during the summer where I sleepwalked from ditches or rest stops. Usually, I woke up within a block of where I'd gone to bed. I remembered that alleyway in Rapid City. A condominium complex had been on the other side of it. Is that where Conroy had left me?

Di's next question pulled me back into the conversation. "But how did you do it all? How could one man drug eight individuals, and deposit them in eight different cities all over the country, without anybody seeing or knowing about it? It doesn't seem feasible."

"I had help," Conroy replied.

"From who?" Mica asked.

"My lawyer and pilot."

"What?" Mica said.

"They helped me carry each of you when you were drugged and unconscious," Conroy explained.

Silence again hung for at least a minute.

"But that still looks kind of suspicious, don't you think?" Jet remarked. "To be carried into a condo or brought up in the elevator? What'd you do, chopper us to our condo's rooftops?" he said sarcastically.

Conroy nodded. "Yes, in the bigger cities, that's exactly what I did."

My eyes bulged. "What? You *helicoptered* us around the country?" I remembered the faint sound of a helicopter this afternoon. Is that how Conroy had returned to the Forbidden Hills?

"It's my main form of transportation," Conroy said. "It's the only way I've ever left these Hills. Believe it or not, it's the most discreet way to get in and out of these mountains."

"But how did you get a helicopter?" Amber asked.

"I own it," Conroy replied.

Jet's eyebrows shot up. "You own it?"

"So you have money," Di stated. "Lots of money, obviously, if you're the one who left us the funds in our bank accounts."

"Yes," Conroy answered.

“But if we’ve been living in seclusion, how did you get the money?” Di drummed her fingers on the end table. “If what you’re saying is true, you couldn’t work living in seclusion out here. So where’d you get the money to fund all of this?”

Conroy cleared his throat. “I did work actually. I never stopped working. That’s why I had the lab downstairs created so I could continue my research, but I also come from a wealthy family and have invested well over the years. Money has never been an issue in my life. Ever.”

“But money leaves a trail, right?” Jasper said. “So if this so called group of yours, was really looking for you, couldn’t they track it? Through money withdrawals or whatever? Surely they could have found you that way.”

“My investment firm handles everything for me,” Conroy replied. “That and most of my funds are kept in off shore accounts. They’re not as easy to track.”

“How much money do you have?” Jacinda asked. “If you don’t mind my asking.”

Conroy shrugged. “More than any of us could ever need.”

“But that still doesn’t explain how you got us out of the cabin, into a helicopter, with only the help of your lawyer and pilot,” Di replied. “That’s eight of us versus three of you. Surely we would have fought when you tried to drug us? Or did you slip it in a drink or something?”

Conroy shook his head. “No, neither of them helped get you out of here.” He hung his head for a minute. “I’m not proud of this, but I lied to you all. I told you we were going on a trip. I took you all to one of my homes in Montana and drugged you there. After that, it was merely a job to carry you back to the chopper, which is when my lawyer and pilot stepped in. We took you all to your various cities from there.”

Everyone stared at him, silent. “I guess money really can buy anything,” I said.

“Yes, Galena,” Conroy said. “It really can.”

The heat off Flint escalated. A muscle clenched in his jaw.

“By the way, why do you keep calling me that?” I blurted. I put my hand on Flint’s thigh, hoping the change in topic might distract him from his almost palpable rage. “My name’s Lena.”

“Lena’s short for the name I gave you, which is Galena,” Conroy answered.

“And you named Di, Diamond and Jacinda, Jacinth?” I asked.

“Correct. We never knew your birth names, or if your parents ever named you, so the group gave you names. Your group was named after natural elements. Diamond, Flint, Jacinth, Galena, Amber, Mica, Jet and Jasper. Your names are all derived from rocks, minerals and gems. I named you all.”

“Oh,” I replied, stunned. That was another clue we’d never put together. I hadn’t realized our names were connected.

Everyone else remained quiet, brooding expressions on their faces.

It was a lot to take in.

Leaning back, I crossed my arms. Switching my vision, I again studied Conroy’s cloud. It was so colorful and vibrant. However, like all colorful clouds, I couldn’t firmly read it. Was Conroy really as honest and kind hearted as he claimed to be?

I remembered my initial reaction to him in the clearing. My gut had told me to trust him. Had my gut ever been wrong?

No.

If what Conroy said was true, he had only ever meant us well. He took us from homes in which we surely would have died from neglect, or been so horribly abused we would have been shells of the people we were now. And as soon as he found out what his O’Brien group was truly capable of, he took us from them too, even though it had meant giving up his own life in the process.

Flint’s energy pushed into me. A dark expression covered his face. I could tell he wasn’t reaching the same conclusions as me.

I listened to my gut feeling again. It told me that Conroy was good. He meant well.

Uncrossing my arms, I relaxed back into the couch. Conroy *had* spent fifteen years in hiding with a group of sensory enhanced kids. Fifteen years away from everything he’d ever known, simply in hopes of keeping us safe. And while giving us a drug six months ago to make us forget wasn’t ethical, I agreed with Flint on that one, Conroy had once again only had our best interests at heart. He was trying to protect us and give us back the lives stolen from us.

Di stood and paced a few times. “Is our situation really as dangerous as you claim? Everything you’ve done has been so extreme. Are we really in that much danger?”

“You’re all living proof of the unethical and illegal activities that transpired within O’Brien,” Conroy said. “So yes, our situation really *is* that dangerous.”

Di stopped and stared at him. “So you created your memory drug, hoping we’d make safe lives in the real world?”

“Yes.”

She put her hands on her hips. “Were we supposed to survive off that money you left us?”

“That was there as a backup. However, you’re all educated and have exceptional gifts. I taught you all myself. If you’d chosen to get a job, that wouldn’t have been a problem.”

Flint snorted. “Without a diploma that seems doubtful. How would we get jobs?”

“Jobs were arranged for all of you, if you chose to take them,” Conroy said. “You all would have received a letter stating your new positions of employment if you’d stayed in your cities.”

“But we didn’t stay,” Di said. “All of us felt an urge to return to Colorado. Something inside all of us led us back here.”

“I realize that,” Conroy said. “Which is also why I tattooed you. I gave you the clues necessary to find me and this place if needed.”

“And you’ve been living here ever since?” Mica asked.

“Yes,” Conroy replied.

Jet smirked. “What were you planning on doing, retiring here?”

Conroy frowned. “You’re not the only one O’Brien’s looking for, and my lab’s here. Essentially, my life is here and has been for the last fifteen years. It was easy enough to stay and keep working, and I knew when all of your tracking devices went blank, except for yours Galena, that I had to stay until I found all of you again. I couldn’t leave here if there was a possibility any of you would show up. I kept the door unlocked every day in case I wasn’t here when one of you returned.”

I thought about the triple dead bolt on the door. No wonder it hadn’t been engaged.

Jet raised an eyebrow. “Why didn’t you implant GPS locators under our skin? Wouldn’t that have been easier?”

Conroy either chose to ignore his sarcastic tone or didn’t pick up on it. “I considered it, but I couldn’t risk it. If O’Brien ever found any of you and found a GPS device under your skin, they could potentially derive a way to

track the devices and hunt the rest of you. I figured cell phones were the safest option."

That matter-of-fact comment made everyone go silent. It almost didn't seem real what Conroy was telling us. It was as if our lives were plucked right from a science fiction movie.

"So now what?" I finally asked. "What do we do from here?"

Conroy eyed me with a grim expression. "That is a very good question. Only it's a question I don't have an answer to."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

The eight of us talked long into the night. After lots of arguing, discussing and more arguing, we eventually decided we had two options. We could either continue living in hiding for the rest of our lives, essentially staying in this cabin and going back to the lives we'd left. Or we could leave and face the consequences of O'Brien hunting us.

The next morning, a somber mood hung in the air, similar to the gray clouds that rolled in overnight. Distant thunder sounded.

Di stood by the fireplace, arms crossed. "We can't keep running, and we can't spend our lives in hiding."

Flint and I sat on the couch. I curled my legs tighter underneath me while Flint tensed at my side. From the way Conroy described O'Brien, it was as though they had spies all over the country, but that wasn't possible. Or was it? I thought about Conroy choppering us out of the Forbidden Hills, about the unlikelihood of that. It seemed a lot of impossibilities could be done with money.

"What do you suggest?" Flint asked his sister.

Di placed her hands on her hips. "We have to find out what they'd do to us and whether or not other lost children are still alive."

Everyone grew silent.

"Won't they kill us if they find us?" Amber's fingers clenched the couch pillow tightly.

"But we can't stay in hiding forever," Jasper said. "We've done nothing wrong. Why should we have to pay the price?"

"Even if that price is our lives?" Jacinda said. "Don't get me wrong. I'm ready to get out of Timbuktu and get into a city, but that was before I knew all of this. I quite like being alive."

"Even if it means we're prisoners inside our own home?" Di countered. "For the rest of our lives?"

Jacinda frowned. "Maybe. I don't know. I wish I knew more about this group."

“Exactly!” Di said. “We need to learn more about them. At the very least, find out what they want.”

“But how?” Jasper asked.

“Conroy,” I replied. “He knows who they are and where they are.”

Flint scowled heavily. He put his arm around me and pulled me close.

“But will he help us?” Mica asked. “It seemed like he wanted to stay under the radar. I can’t see him walking through the front doors of O’Brien, asking where his old buddies are.”

“No,” Di agreed. “But if he’s too afraid to go back than we’ll have to. Or at least I’m going, even if none of you are.”

That statement made me grow cold. We’d never done anything without the entire group agreeing, but now Di was saying she’d go alone if she had to. I chewed my lip. Our lives were about to change. I knew none of us would agree to be split up. We were in this together, come what may.

“Does that mean we’re going back to O’Brien?” I asked.

“How about we handle it like we always do, with a vote?” Di said. “Those in favor of finding this group, raise your hand.” She, of course, was the first to raise hers. I was the second.

Flint inched closer. “I go where you go.” He raised his hand.

“We’re in,” said the twins.

“No way I’d miss this.” Mica’s hand came up.

“Jacinda, Amber?” Di asked. Fat rain droplets fell against the window. The sound drummed through the room. “Are you in?”

Jacinda glanced at Amber with raised eyebrows. Amber nodded, wide-eyed. “Okay, I’ll go.”

“Me too,” Jacinda responded.

“Go where?” Conroy stepped out of the bathroom, toweling his hair off. Steam rolled into the living room.

“Back to O’Brien,” Di replied. “And you’re going to take us there.”

Conroy dropped the towel. His face turned ashen.

I sank against Flint. I needed the secure and safe feeling his presence evoked. We were going back to where it all began, no matter what we may find. I felt Flint’s gaze on me. For the first time since I’d met him, something in his gaze made me pause. The protective look he always had was still there, but fear now lingered as well.

The rain fell harder. It pelted against the windows, sounding loudly in the room.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Flint whispered into my ear.

“What choice do we really have?”

He stared at me, an anguished expression on his face. He wrapped both arms tightly around me. We sat like that for a minute as everyone continued talking around us. But it was as if everything became a blur. I closed my eyes, listened to his heartbeat and cherished his unique smell as the rain drummed down on the roof.

I clung tightly to him and wondered if there would come a day when I’d no longer be able to feel him like this, love him like this.

He squeezed me harder, as if he’d been wondering the exact same thing.

REMEMBERED

The Lost Children Trilogy
Book Two

THE LOST CHILDREN SERIES—BOOK TWO

CHAPTER ONE

"What do you think will happen if O'Brien catches us?" Mica's brown eyes narrowed when she glanced at Conroy.

I tensed from where I sat in the backseat and tucked a long strand of dark red hair behind my ear.

Conroy's hands tightened on the steering wheel. His gaze stayed trained on the road ahead. High mountain desert landscape flew by as we traveled down the interstate. Soft road noise hummed in the cab. Northern Arizona was beautiful. Pine forests and rolling hills intermixed with desert. It wasn't a bad place to escape to as we planned our return to O'Brien Pharmaceuticals.

Mica cocked her head. "Would they kill us?"

"I think they may," Conroy finally replied. "It's why hiding is safest."

"But we've decided *not* to hide. If we do, the other lost children will never be free." Mica picked up her bag and rummaged through it.

Conroy took a deep breath and gripped the wheel tighter. His knuckles turned white.

The lost children.

That's what the men in Conroy's old group, Project Renatus, named us when they stole us from our parents almost twenty years ago. It was ironic in a way. None of us were lost. They'd kidnapped us and experimented on us like lab rats. Yet to them, that's what we'd become. The lost children.

Now, the eight of us lived outside of O'Brien Pharmaceutical's walls and were grown adults. All of us were in our late teens or early twenties, and all of us were fighting to be free from the corporation.

Nerves churned my stomach. How much our lives had changed in twenty-four hours. Meeting Conroy in the Forbidden Hills in Colorado. Learning about him and his part in Project Renatus. Discovering that men from that project, governed by O'Brien Pharmaceuticals, wanted us captured or dead.

It seemed too crazy to be true.

Flint’s hand rested on my thigh. He squeezed my leg as I leaned closer to him. The rough fabric from his flannel brushed against my cheek. With it, came his subtle scent. Spice, wood and tangerines. I inhaled and clung to that scent. I needed the safe feeling it always evoked.

Mica pulled a bag of trail mix out of her pack and began munching. “Di will have a plan to get the other lost children back. She always has a plan.”

Conroy didn’t reply.

I wished I could adopt some of Mica’s endless optimism. Dread followed me ever since we left the cabin in the Forbidden Hills. As much as I tried to leave that foreboding feeling in my wake, I couldn’t help but feel bad things were to come.

I glanced over my shoulder. The rest of our unlikely family followed in the Suburban. Even from a distance, Di’s face was visible as she held the wheel. From her grim expression, I guessed she mulled over everything Conroy had revealed to us two days ago. Either that or the twins were driving her crazy.

“When are we gonna stop for a bathroom break?” Mica polished off the remaining peanuts, her crunching chews audible.

Conroy nodded to a sign that flashed by the window. “There’s a gas station a few miles ahead. We can stop there.”

“Good.” Mica brushed crumbs from her top. “I feel like I’m gonna burst.”

“Galena and Flint?” Conroy’s gaze drifted to the rearview mirror. “Does that work for you?”

“Sure.” I dog-eared the paperback mystery that lay forgotten in my lap. “I could use a stop too.”

“When will we reach your house?” Flint’s words were clipped.

I winced. Unlike some of us, Mica and I included, Flint hadn’t been so easily won over by Conroy.

“We’re a few hours away. We should be there by nightfall.” Conroy always replied politely to Flint. The older scientist didn’t seem fazed by Flint’s hostility.

I wondered if Flint and Conroy had always had a rocky relationship. Of course, I’d never know. Memories of my life only went back six months. Frustration bubbled up inside of me. While I now understood why I had no

memories, thanks to the drug Conroy administered to me and everyone else six months ago, I still hated that I didn't know who I was.

Flint leaned forward. "So how do you know this house of yours is safe?"

"I know it's safe because I purchased it a month ago, under one of my aliases. The only person who knows I own it is—"

"Let me guess," Mica cut in. "Your lawyer?"

Conroy nodded. "Exactly."

"Humph." Mica raised an eyebrow. "I still can't believe everything we've learned. It's kinda crazy you know."

"Which part?" I asked. "Where O'Brien Pharmaceuticals stole us off the streets when we were babies from our drug addicted, prostituting parents or how O'Brien kept us locked up while we were experimented on?"

Mica chuckled as a strong push of Flint's energy hit me. Flint's jaw tightened. I laid my hand on his thigh. His warmth seared through his jeans. Right. Maybe it was a little too early to joke about that stuff.

"When you put it like that, it sounds rather barbaric," Conroy said.

Mica's eyebrows shot clear to her hairline. "How could you ever think it *wasn't* barbaric?"

Conroy sighed. His hands tightened on the steering wheel again as we sailed around a turn. "If you could have seen the conditions in which you were born." He stopped, his voice growing quiet. "I'm not saying it justifies what we did, I see that now, but at the time, I was young and hopeful. I'd been passionate about science since I was a boy. The possibilities of untapped chemical creations fascinated me. You have to understand, I was very young when I joined O'Brien. I was naïve and blinded by my ambitions to better the world. At the time, I truly felt as if I was doing the right thing. I thought I was helping all of you. That I was making your lives better."

Mica cocked her head. "I know I just met you, so I can't believe I'm saying this, but I believe you."

"I do too," I said.

Conroy's hands relaxed. A smile lifted his cheeks.

"Well, *I* don't believe you," Flint muttered. He glared out the window.

Conroy's gaze drifted to Flint in the rearview mirror. His smile dimmed.

If only Flint could feel what I did. I switched my vision, activating the part of my brain that was dormant in others. Conroy's cloud appeared. The beautiful rainbow of dancing colors billowed around his shoulders. It was unlike anything I'd seen before. Some of the colors mirrored the colors in our clouds: red, pink, orange, yellow, green, indigo, violet and gold. However, other colors mixed in it too: magenta, silver, navy and at least a dozen more. All of Conroy's colors were faint as if they'd been washed out in a spring rain. All except for two bright colors: blue and pale green. The blue matched the blue in our clouds. However, none of us had pale green.

As always, I couldn't explain why we had colors. I also couldn't get a firm read on Conroy's cloud. The rest of the population had some form of white, gray or black. The whiter the cloud, the more kind a person was, the darker, the eviler. Nobody else had colors. And as for why Conroy had so *many* colors, I had no idea.

However, my gut told me Conroy wouldn't harm us. And if there was one thing I always listened to—it was my gut instinct.

"So how'd you make the memory drug you gave us in April?" Mica asked.

"It was something I created last year, in the lab back home," Conroy replied.

By *home,* I assumed he meant the hidden cabin we'd left in the Forbidden Hills.

"But how did it work?" I asked.

"The drug targeted specific cells in your brains. Upon reaching those targeted cells, it severed all neuronal activity to your long-term memories. Basically, your memories are still there. However, you don't have access to them."

I sat up straighter. "They're still there?"

"Yes."

How does he know that? "So this drug must be different from the one you gave us as babies?"

"It's much safer. Age doesn't affect it."

That comment reminded me of the two oldest children in our original group of ten. I'd never met that older set of twins since they died from the sensory enhancing drug Conroy administered to them. I swallowed uneasily. If I'd been older when he gave me my drug, I could have died too.

Luckily, I was only a few months old when Conroy stole me—plenty young for my brain to adapt.

Mica squirmed in her seat. “I still gotta go to the bathroom. How much longer?”

“Just ahead.” Conroy put his blinker on and glided the Pathfinder off the interstate. I glanced behind us. Sure enough, Di followed.

“I gotta *go*!” Mica squealed. She bounded out of her seat the second we pulled into the gas station.

Conroy followed Mica. Cool air swirled into the car before he slammed his door. I unbuckled my seat belt, but Flint made no move to leave.

It had been a long day of driving. Conroy’s original plan had been to helicopter us straight to his reclusive Arizona home, but after a brief discussion, none of us wanted to leave the Suburban behind. Call us sentimental, but when one’s life is as erratic as ours, familiar things have greater meaning. However, none of us considered what keeping the Suburban entailed. That sentimentality had resulted in a nine-hour drive. It also meant Conroy had to purchase a vehicle since nine of us in the Suburban was too crowded.

“We better get to the bathroom.” I opened my door. “Who knows when the next stop will be.”

Flint grabbed my hand before I stepped out. His sudden grip made the charm bracelet I wore jingle quietly. The charm—a heart with an inscription reading *Love You Forever*—glinted.

“Lena, we don’t have to go with Conroy. You know that, right?”

The urgency in his voice made my stomach sink. I settled back beside him. A strong gust swirled into the car from my still open door. It whipped my long dark red hair around my face.

“I think we should,” I replied.

“But we don’t know if we can trust him.”

He gripped my hand tighter. His palm was so warm. Another steady push of energy rolled off him.

Feeling Flint’s energy was something I’d grown used to during the past two months. For some reason, the power inside him radiated out. It was hard to miss, at least for me. The drug Conroy gave me as a child resulted in my unique ability to see auras around people or clouds as I called them. However, it went a step beyond that with Flint. I could also *feel* his. When

he was angry, aroused or felt any other strong emotion, the power rolling off him increased. The strength of it right now was enough to tell me he was very serious about ditching Conroy.

I slammed my door closed. Jacinda and the rest of the gang were getting out of the Suburban. I knew none of them would be able to hear us with the door closed, except Jacinda that is, thanks to her enhanced auditory sense.

“We can’t leave Conroy.”

“Why not?” Flint demanded.

“I know you don’t believe it, but I know that Conroy would never hurt us. Just like I knew when *we* first met in August that you’d never let anyone hurt me. Those gut feelings we’ve all had about things? They’re our subconscious trying to break through. Don’t you see that?”

He gazed out the window, his expression brooding. “Then why don’t I trust him?”

I swallowed uneasily. *That’s a very good question.* “I don’t know.”

A sharp knock on the window made me jump. Jet and Jasper’s faces plastered against it. Amber hung just behind them, grinning.

“Hey love birds, you two coming in?” Jasper called.

I forced a smile. “Let’s go.”

With stiff movements, Flint opened his door.

The twins and Amber sauntered away. Laughter trailed in their wakes. As usual, the twins’ jokes prevailed, even in our current circumstances.

I inhaled the evening air. Already, it had cooled. Flat desert landscape surrounded us. The sky blazed purple from the setting sun. Distant mountains hovered on the horizon, hinting at colder temps to come.

“Chilly here.” I shivered.

Flint reached inside the vehicle and grabbed his jacket. He slipped it around my shoulders before I could protest. The parka practically swallowed me.

Flint leaned down and kissed me softly on the neck. His lips lingered. Another push of energy rolled into me. Worry lined its edges.

“Are you two coming?” Jacinda stood by the door to the gas station. Her long blond hair trailed down her back. I hadn’t realized she was waiting for us.

“Come on.” I tugged Flint.

Our footsteps slapped the pavement. Flint glanced over his shoulder several times, his gaze curious. According to Conroy, we needed to be cautious in public. He claimed O'Brien *still* had eyes all over the country, people paid to watch out for a group of eight individuals matching our descriptions. I wasn't sure any of us believed him, though. The eight of us had been together for two months, granted it was on a secluded ranch, but still, there had been no sign of men watching us anywhere.

"How has it been riding with Conroy?" Jacinda asked.

"Good." I had to look up to address her. It still amazed me that we were half-sisters. I figured our fathers must have been complete opposites. Her dad a Norwegian Viking and mine an Irish midget. "Interesting too. Conroy's been telling us about the drug he gave us. It targeted our long-term memories."

"Is that right?" Jacinda cocked her head causing her long, blond hair to fall over her shoulder.

Flint held the door. A large shelf of candy bars greeted us the second we stepped inside. I eyed the Snickers with interest, but Jacinda steered me away.

The travel center was large and clean. Scents of hot dogs and nacho cheese drifted in the air when we walked by the food station. Navajo art and souvenirs hung on display throughout the aisles. Halloween decorations draped from the ceiling. One ghastly ghoul looked particularly disturbing with its black, vacant eyes and open tooth-filled mouth. The normalcy of this lone travel stop was exactly what I needed.

Some of the nerves left my stomach as Jacinda pulled me to the back of the gas station. An array of sandwiches lined the refrigerated section. They beckoned to me. Even though I'd been well fed for the past two months, my days as a homeless vagabond, when food was precious, still lingered.

"Bathroom first." Jacinda rolled her eyes.

I grumbled but followed.

When we stood at the sinks, washing our hands, I asked, "How long do you think it'll be before we leave for Chicago to search for the other lost children?"

Jacinda's hands stilled on her paper towel. With a start, she resumed drying them. "We'll have to see what Conroy discovers about his old group. It would be foolish to leave immediately."

“Jacinda! Lena!” The bathroom door banged open.

Di stood in the doorway. She wore her usual all black attire which mirrored her midnight hair and dark eyes. “Come on, we’re leaving.”

“Already?” I threw my paper towel in the trash. “But we’ve only been here five minutes, and we haven’t bought anything to eat.”

“Then hurry up.” She glanced over her shoulder before stepping into the restroom. The door closed softly behind her. Looking past us, her eyes darted to the bathroom stalls. She lowered her voice. “Is anyone else in here?”

Jacinda glanced at the empty stalls. “No, just us.”

“Good,” Di said. “Because we need to get moving.”

My heart rate increased. “Why? Did something happen? Did someone spot us?”

Di shook her head curtly, her short hair swaying with the movement. “No, but Conroy has something for us at his house. He just told me about it.”

I gave Jacinda a questioning look.

Jacinda merely raised an eyebrow and shrugged. “This is news to me too.”

“What is it?” I asked Di.

Di smiled. Her eyes carried the manic gleam I was becoming to recognize all too well. “Another drug he wants to give us, but this drug will make us *remember.”*

CHAPTER TWO

"What?" There was no way I heard her correctly.

Di nodded vigorously. Her dark eyes practically glowed. "It's another drug to counter the effect of the first one."

"Seriously?" My mouth dropped. "As in, a drug that will make us remember . . . our pasts?"

"Yes!" Her eyes brightened.

A mixture of fear and curiosity filtered across Jacinda's face. Similar emotions swirled inside me as the implications of another drug sank in. *If this drug works, will we remember everything, even our earliest childhood memories?* I thought about what those memories might hold.

Memories of O'Brien Pharmaceuticals. Memories of being experimented on.

Do I want to remember that?

But I already knew the answer. With the bad memories came the good. Flint and I had both felt something for one another since the moment we laid eyes on each other. I wanted the memories of him and me. I wanted to remember everything, everything I had ever done or experienced.

My mind raced with what I knew about Conroy's drugs. The drug may not work. Or a side effect could occur. I bit my lip. Not even a second passed before I knew what I was going to do.

I was willing to take that chance.

The door to the restroom banged open. Flint's figure towered in the space. Heat and raw energy radiated off him.

"All of you, follow me. We're leaving *without* Conroy." Flint's chest rose heavily with each breath.

I took a step toward him. "I guess you heard Conroy's got another drug for us? A drug to make us remember everything he erased?"

Flint's jaw tightened. "Oh, I'm sure he'd *love* to drug us again, but there's no way I'm taking that, and I won't let you either." He stepped inside the restroom, the door closing behind him.

I softened my tone. I knew when Flint was in a mood like this—so concerned for my safety that he went wild—only soothing reason could permeate his stubborn resolve. “But what if it works?”

“And what if it doesn’t?”

“But it could.”

“Or it could kill us.”

“It won’t kill us if it’s like the drug that made us forget. That one’s safe, remember?”

Flint took a deep breath and closed his eyes. “But what if it *isn’t* safe, Lena?” He opened his eyes. “Then what? What if it damages us? Or causes one of us to get sick?”

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Di and Jacinda discreetly leave the restroom. I stepped closer to Flint and laid my hand over his. “The first drug didn’t. So why would this one?”

“Conroy’s drugs aren’t to be taken lightly.” His tone grew hard. “Remember what Conroy said they did to some of the kids at O’Brien? Irreversible encephalopathy? Those kids *died*. We’re now grown adults. If what Conroy said is true, our brains don’t adapt as easily. Each day we get older, the risks increase.”

“But this drug isn’t like those,” I countered. “It didn’t give us abilities. It just took away our memories.”

His nostrils flared.

“Conroy wouldn’t do this if it weren’t safe. Remember what I said? I trust him.”

He stared at me for a moment and then whispered, “Babe . . . please.”

I crumbled when a pained look crossed his features. His blatant fear made me pause. *What if his fears are valid? What if this second drug kills one of us and tears us apart? Just like he fears?*

I shook my head internally. No, it wouldn’t do that. This drug was different than the ones Conroy gave us as babies. He’d said so himself. *But no drug comes without risk and side effects.*

I shook that thought off too and wrapped my arms around Flint. The heat searing off him went right through the parka. “You’re not going to lose me. I think we can trust Conroy. He knows what he’s doing.”

“You don’t know that.” He crushed me tightly to him.

“No, I don’t, but I believe that and for me, that’s enough.”

He cupped my cheeks, forcing my head up to meet his dark eyes. “If I ever lost you . . .”

I laid my hand over his. “You’re not going to get rid of me that easily. Haven’t you noticed I’m made of tougher stuff than that?”

A haunted expression clouded his face. I knew he was thinking about Aaron, about the physical injuries I suffered last month because of the psycho cowboy. Injuries I overcame.

“We better go.” I pulled away from him.

When we emerged from the restroom, a few people glanced our way. I’m sure having a large male inside the women’s restroom wasn’t something one saw every day. Especially not a male as breathtakingly handsome as Flint.

Tall, strong and lean, Flint had a body most women drooled over. His face was equally attractive. With olive skin, a long, straight nose, piercing, deep-set dark eyes, and a full but firm mouth, he was incredibly beautiful. I glanced down at myself. Small frame, pale skin, and unruly dark red hair summed up my looks pretty succinctly. In other words, I wasn’t exactly a fashion model, but I knew I was attractive. The curves I’d developed since putting weight on helped, and Flint’s reaction every time he ripped my clothes off told me exactly how appealing he found me.

“Hey, guys!” Jasper called.

The twins, Mica and Amber stood together, at the travel center’s front door, waving.

“Let’s go!” Jet called.

I quickly scanned our audience again. Everyone seemed like benign strangers. I still assessed each of them curiously. Considering what Conroy believed, the little old ladies two aisles over could be two of O’Brien’s spies. I shifted my vision until their clouds appeared. Both white or ivory. Good clouds. They were kind, honest people.

Hardly spy material.

A few Native Americans perused the aisles. A lone clerk manned the cash register. All white or ivory clouds. I switched my vision back to normal. The clouds disappeared. While I trusted Conroy, he did seem rather worried for nothing.

It wasn’t until Flint and I stepped away from the restroom that I saw another stranger in the gas station. A man stood in the corner. He was alone and wore dark shades despite the evening hour. A cell phone was pressed to

his ear. His lips moved. He appeared to be watching us. I switched my vision again. When his cloud appeared, I stepped back.

Dark gray.

"What's wrong?" Flint said.

I scanned the entire travel stop again to make sure I hadn't missed anyone else. No one—just the man in the corner. My gaze swung back to him.

He was gone.

Unease slithered through me. I shook my head. Now, *I* was acting paranoid.

"Lena, is everything okay?"

"Yeah, I saw a man with a dark cloud, but he's gone now. That's all." I pointed to the corner by the soda machines. "He was standing there. He wore sunglasses and was talking to someone on a cell phone. His cloud was dark, and he was watching us. Did you see him?"

Flint shook his head.

I ran a hand through my hair and berated myself for getting caught up in Conroy's worries. "Let's get going. I think everyone's waiting for us."

A minute later, we were climbing into the Pathfinder. The dark clouded man was nowhere to be seen. "That's weird. It's like he disappeared," I muttered to no one in particular.

Conroy clicked his seatbelt in place. "Who disappeared?"

"Oh, just some guy I saw in the gas station. He had a dark gray cloud and seemed to be watching us."

Conroy's movements stilled. "Watching you?"

"I'm sure it was nothing." I settled in beside Flint and fastened my seatbelt.

"What did he look like? Describe him to me," Conroy demanded.

Unease again fluttered through my veins even though it seemed impossible that O'Brien could know we were here. However, Conroy's calm manner had disappeared. He had turned in his seat, his hazel eyes sharp as he scanned our surroundings.

"Uh . . . he had sunglasses on, was medium build and had brown hair."

Mica sat in the front passenger seat, slurping a bright red slushy drink. Her gaze drifted from us to the store. "Did he do something?"

"No." I shook my head. "He was just watching us."

Conroy put the Pathfinder into drive and made a signal to Di. She followed us back to the interstate. A few minutes later, we were speeding west on I-40. Conroy kept glancing over his shoulder, scanning the cars behind us.

“Is anyone following?” His voice was tight.

Flint frowned but turned to glance out the back windshield. After a moment, he said, “There’s a sedan about three hundred yards back. It’s staying at an even distance.” A few other cars flew past us.

“Mica,” Conroy said. “Zoom in on the driver. Tell me what he looks like.”

Mica continued to slurp her drink as her brown eyes narrowed. Her enhanced sight allowed her to see details on small objects hundreds of yards away.

“Dark glasses. Brown hair. He’s talking on a cell phone.”

“That sounds like the guy I saw,” I said uneasily.

Mica cocked her head. “He’s reaching for something now.”

Conroy tensed. “Reaching for what?”

Mica’s pupils grew wider and then she laughed. “It’s just a map. He’s actually using a *map*.” Another disbelieving chuckle escaped her. “Apparently, the dude hasn’t figured out that it’s faster to use his cell phone’s GPS.”

I let out a sigh of relief. It was silly that I was actually getting concerned. “So he’s just a traveler?”

“We can’t assume that,” Conroy said. “Where’s his license plate from?”

“Texas.” Mica rattled off the number.

“I’ll look into that when we reach the house, but if this man *is* following us, I can’t take the chance of him discovering the home’s location. We’ll have to lose him and be careful to ensure that nobody else in the area is working with him.” Conroy put his blinker on and exited the interstate.

Di and the others followed.

When we reached the stop sign for an intersecting highway, Conroy stopped. Mica’s slurps filled the cab, but at Conroy’s request, she kept her gaze glued to the vehicle the man drove. A few seconds ticked past.

I’m sure Di and the others were wondering what we were doing. None of us had told them about the man.

“There he goes,” Mica said.

The sedan sped past on the interstate. In the dying sunlight, the only details I saw were that of a four-door sedan. That was it.

Mica chuckled. “He’s still looking at the map. I think the dude’s lost.”

Conroy’s gaze followed the sedan until it disappeared around a curve. “I’m not taking any chances. There could be other men in communication with him. It’s possible we were spotted somewhere between here and Colorado.”

Nostalgia for the seclusion of Pete and Val’s ranch and the small town of Little Raven slid through me. Hideaway Hills seemed like light-years away. I had no idea if Conroy was paranoid or if his fears were valid, but I still craved the safety and quaintness of the ranch.

“What do you propose we do from here?” Flint’s energy strummed off him into me. It was filled with skepticism.

“We’ll take back roads to the house. It’ll take longer, but it will be easier to spot if anyone’s following us. Mica, I need you to stay alert and tell me if you see anything unusual.” Conroy’s brusque orders were so unlike any way he’d acted before.

“Flint?” Conroy’s eyes drifted to him in the rearview mirror. “Will you tell Diamond about the man Lena saw? I’m sure they all want to know why we’ve stopped.”

“Is that really necessary?”

“Yes.”

Flint shook his head but did as Conroy asked. Cool air swirled into the cab when Flint opened his door. In a lightning fast move, he stood by Di’s window.

I brushed hair out of my eyes. “Hopefully, he was just a traveler who happens to have a dark cloud.”

Conroy nodded. “Let’s hope.”

Trying to take my mind off Conroy’s fears, I leaned forward. “Di mentioned that you have a drug at your house. She said it will give us our memories back.”

Conroy’s expression tightened. “That’s correct, and at this point, I think it’s important for all of you to take it.”

The setting sun blazed through the cab’s interior. I shielded my eyes so I could see Conroy better. “Why’s that?”

“So you can all remember what you’re truly capable of. Those additional abilities will be needed if you’re intent on returning to O’Brien.”

CHAPTER THREE

Mica's head whipped toward Conroy, her drink forgotten. "*What* additional abilities? What the heck are you talking about?"

"I'm sorry, but I don't have time to explain now."

Flint reappeared by my side. He'd moved at his speed. In other words, one second he was gone, the next he was there. The air rustled around us.

He slammed his door. "All right, they'll follow."

Conroy turned onto the highway. A car driving in the other lane slowed before pulling onto the interstate entrance ramp. Conroy's eyes narrowed as he watched it.

"Mica, do you see anyone following us?" Conroy checked his mirrors.

Mica swung her gaze in all directions. Her pupils grew large and then small when she zoomed in and out. "There's a car about a mile down this highway. It's driving toward us."

"They could be from O'Brien." Conroy drove another mile before turning onto a two-lane road. The GPS on the dash recalculated our route.

Flint rolled his eyes and leaned toward me. "Paranoid with a capital *P*," he whispered.

Di followed closely behind, putting just enough distance between us to allow Mica a good view in all directions. The winding road helped as we climbed into the mountains. Mica continued to scan the horizon at Conroy's request. She told him everything she saw.

"A maroon minivan just appeared on the highway we left, it's . . . The white sedan that turned onto the highway from the road we passed is heading south. Two kids are in the back and . . . The bikers stopped. One of them is rummaging through his saddle bag . . ."

Every few minutes, she'd look forward and tell Conroy what appeared ahead. "Nobody's up this road, but there's a home in that valley. A light's on in the kitchen. I see movement in the . . ."

The evening carried on. The sun slowly faded. Conroy switched roads every time a new road appeared, sometimes doubling back the way we'd

come. It was a good thing he'd filled both vehicles with gas at the travel center. We were already down to half a tank.

Green digits glowed on the dash's clock as Mica continually assessed our surroundings. It wasn't until eight at night that Conroy decided we weren't being followed.

"So do you think the man with the dark cloud was truly just a traveler?" While my brain was telling me there was no possible way anyone from O'Brien could know where we were, my heart still hammered every time Mica thought someone might be following us. Conroy seemed so convinced we *could* be followed.

Conroy shook his head. "Not necessarily. He could be or we could have lost him."

My stomach churned and not from lack of food.

The GPS once again recalculated our course when Conroy turned around. He rolled down his window before Di did a U-turn.

"I think we're okay. We'll head to the house now."

Di scanned the road. From her frown, I wasn't sure if she also felt this was overkill or if she agreed with Conroy. "Okay, we'll follow you."

My stomach grumbled as we backtracked to the main highway before heading north. However, this time it was reminding me we'd missed supper. Mica reached into her bag and pulled out gummy bears. Not exactly filling or nutritious, but it would have to do. She dumped a handful in my palm.

Popping a bear in my mouth, my heart rate slowly returned to normal. "So what are these additional powers you were talking about earlier?"

Flint raised his eyebrows. "Additional powers?"

I gave him a gummy. "Conroy told us the drug that counter effects the memory one would also help us recover additional powers. He said we may need them if we return to O'Brien."

"We have more powers?" Flint glanced toward Conroy, an eyebrow raised.

"Some of you, yes." Conroy's gaze stayed on the road. Wildlife continually appeared in the ditches. The desert seemed to come alive at night.

Mica popped a few gummies in her mouth. "So are you going to explain these additional abilities now?"

Conroy turned on his high beams. "It's something a few of you and I began working on in your late teens. However, the drug I gave you would

have made you forget everything you learned. None of you would remember what you're truly capable of."

I frowned. "You mean I can do more than see clouds?"

"Yes."

Mica cocked her head. "And I can do more than see really well?"

"Yes."

Flint's energy grew. "What more can I do?"

"Nothing. Not everyone has additional abilities."

I was about to ask another question when Conroy swerved to miss a coyote. It disappeared into the brush on the other side of the road.

"So you're saying unless we take this drug, we'll never be strong enough to defeat O'Brien?" Sarcasm laced Flint's words.

"I'm not saying you won't defeat them, but I *am* saying you stand a better chance."

Flint's gaze narrowed. "And how do you know this drug is safe?"

"Because I tested it."

Flint guffawed. "Who'd you test it on?"

"Myself. I tested all of the drugs I gave to you on myself."

I stared at him, open-mouthed. "*All* of the drugs? Even the ones you gave us when we were babies? The ones that made our abilities?" I laid a palm on Flint's thigh. His muscles bunched.

"Yes. After the older set of twins died in your group I began testing all of the drugs on myself first—to ensure that they were safe."

"But, Conroy," Mica said with a sigh. "If you tested all of the drugs on yourself, how are you still alive? I thought the drugs only worked on small children and killed anyone older than three?"

"The more potent mixtures do, but I gave myself the first generation drugs of the ones that created your abilities. The ones all of you ultimately received were the end result."

"Seriously?" Mica's brown eyes widened. "So do you have all of our abilities?"

"No, not like you do. The drugs I took weren't strong enough for complete transformations, but I do have some of your abilities. However, they're subtle."

"How subtle?" I asked.

Conroy's brow furrowed. "I'm stronger than most men my age. That's from Flint's drug. And my hearing and eyesight are better than most. I also

get feelings off people. You could say I'm good at reading others. I acquired that from your drug."

My mouth dropped. "So you're essentially able to do what *all* of us do but not as strongly?"

Conroy shook his head. "No, not nearly as strongly. I probably won't ever need glasses or hearing aids but it's nothing like what Jacinth or Mica can do."

"Can you see the future?" Mica asked.

"No. Diamond's and the twins' abilities are the ones I acquired the least from. If anything, I may sense things on occasion, but that's it."

I cocked my head. "What kind of things do you sense?"

"Well . . . right now, I have a bad feeling about taking all of you out of the Forbidden Hills. I know that my old group is still actively pursuing us, and the fact that we're no longer in hiding makes me nervous."

"Couldn't that be you being paranoid?" Mica persisted. "All of us have been wandering the country for the past six months. Don't you think they would have found us by now if they were going to?"

It seemed as if Mica, Flint and I *all* thought Conroy's actions were overkill.

"Until recently, you weren't all together," Conroy countered. "They're not looking for individuals. They're looking for a group of eight adults that match your descriptions."

Flint rolled his eyes. "Why not change our hair colors and have us wear disguises? Or would we have to? We left O'Brien when we were kids. How would they recognize us as adults?"

Conroy's jaw clenched. "O'Brien's technology is very sophisticated. Computer imaging software could give them renditions of what your facial features appear like now. Couple that with hair and eye colors, and they probably have fairly accurate descriptions of your appearance. That's why we must stay in hiding until we're prepared to return to O'Brien. In today's world with computer software recognition programs and advanced communication systems, it's not easy to stay anonymous."

"That's why you drugged us six months ago and left us in different cities around the country." I already knew this from what he'd told us the other day, but it was only now sinking in.

"Exactly. It was the only way to keep you safe while letting you live normal, free lives."

“Back to this memory drug,” Flint said, his tone hard. “You’re saying you tested the antidote on yourself, but if you did, how do you know that it really works? It’s not as if your memory was gone, like ours are.”

“Oh, but it was. I tested that drug on myself too.”

My mouth dropped. “You did?”

“Yes, the drug I gave you all six months ago I tested on myself initially. I took the exact drug, so I’d know the end result. I wanted to know exactly what you’d be experiencing.”

I shook my head. “But that’d make you forget *everything*. I don’t get it. How did you know to take the antidote or what to do after you woke up?”

Conroy braked when another critter ran across the road. “I had a plan in place. I knew I’d forget everything so I had detailed instructions on what to do when I woke up. I waited a day before taking the antidote, and my memories returned.”

“How many of your drugs have you taken?” I asked.

“Over the years, probably close to twenty.”

I frowned. “That’s more than you’ve given any of us.”

“Correct. Not all of the drugs I’ve created worked.”

“But those drugs were really powerful—right?” Mica said.

“That’s correct. They were all mind altering.”

I twirled a strand of hair between my fingers. “Did the other guys in Project Renatus test the drugs on themselves first?”

Conroy made a disgusted sound. “No. Marcus Christenson and Albert Darlington never tested any drugs on themselves. They wouldn’t dream of harming themselves, only children.”

Bitterness hung in Conroy’s words. My fingers stilled. It was the first time I’d heard Conroy sound angry.

“But why would they want us dead?” Mica asked.

“You’re all living proof of the illegal practices that O’Brien conducted. All of us would go to prison if it were ever discovered.”

“Which is why they’d rather have us dead or captured.” Mica sighed.

“Yes.” Conroy cleared his throat. “Ah, we’re almost there.”

I glanced out the window. Blackness surrounded us. We were no longer on the highway but a small single lane road. I hadn’t noticed when we’d pulled onto it. Moonlight revealed a mountainous desert tinged with snow.

“Where are we?” I glanced around.

“About five miles from the house.” Conroy nodded ahead. “It’s just beyond that ravine.”

We pulled onto a long, paved driveway that appeared to snake through the hills. A heavy metal gate barred us from entering. Conroy opened his window and punched in a code before placing his fingertip against some kind of keypad. The gates swung open soundlessly. Conroy pulled the vehicle forward. I turned to see Di and the others follow.

Evergreen and sagebrush were barely visible in the headlights. It was so dark out here. When we got to the end of the never-ending driveway, I gazed out. “This is where you live?”

Conroy pulled up to a house, if you could call it that. It looked more like a fortress. “For the time being. Welcome to your new home.”

CHAPTER FOUR

Conroy's house didn't exactly scream desert adobe. Instead, it was made of concrete and glass and had a very modern feel to it. In the moonlight, sharp angles and severe roof lines made any sense of homey comfort vanish in its architecture.

I stepped out of the vehicle. "Who built this?"

"A celebrity," Conroy replied. "I never caught his name. He had it custom built with the latest security equipment only to decide he didn't want to live in Arizona. It went on the market promptly so I picked it up."

He picked it up. Like it was no big deal to buy a multi-million dollar house on a whim.

"I chose this house based on its security," Conroy added. "We should be safe here, for the time being."

Slamming car doors sounded in the night. Di, Amber, the twins and Jacinda poured out of the Suburban.

"Wow!" Amber exclaimed. "This is your house?"

"*Our* house," Conroy corrected.

"It's huge." Jacinda's long blond hair shone in the moonlight as she surveyed the home.

"And new." Di's gaze traveled over the freshly planted landscape.

Junipers, yuccas and creosotes were a few of the species adorning the perimeter. They were awash in the pale security lights that surrounded the exterior.

"Looks rather . . . indestructible," Jasper stated.

Di cocked her head, her short dark hair swaying. "And out of place."

"I agree. It doesn't fit with the desert landscape," Conroy replied.

"That's an understatement," Jet said. The twins laughed. Their expressions changed into the weird myriad display that happened when they spoke telepathically. Jet laughed again.

"Jasper." Amber pouted, crossing her arms. "You promised not to do that."

“Sorry, baby.” He pulled her closely to him.

She squealed before he reached down to kiss her deeply. Amber wrapped her arms tightly around him. I raised my eyebrows at the graphic display.

Mica rolled her eyes and made a sound of disgust. “Have they always been this way?”

Conroy frowned, an uncomfortable expression growing on his face. He cleared his throat. “Uh, no. Now, please, follow me. I’d like everyone to bring their bags inside and then we’ll stow the vehicles in the garage. I don’t know if O’Brien will fly drones this far from that travel station, but I’m not taking any chances.”

Flint and I again shared a look. *Drones?*

We walked to the home’s entrance along a series of stepping stones nestled into pristine gravel. Everything around the perimeter was expertly landscaped. Not one pebble sat out of place.

The front door, if it could be called that, was rather odd. Normally I expected a porch or doorbell or something that resembled a *door* at the entrance of a home. On this structure, there was only a large steel rectangle. No windows, no peephole. There wasn’t a door handle, and there certainly wasn’t a doorbell. It looked like a steel wall.

For a moment, I wondered how on earth we’d get in. Conroy, however, calmly reached for a small box on the wall. He pushed his fingertip against something. A soft click sounded and a keypad lit up. He punched in a series of numbers, pressed his fingerprint against something, and the sound of a heavy metal bolt released. The door silently opened.

“Jeez,” Jet muttered. “Are we able to get *out* of this place?”

We all followed Conroy inside. Lights clicked on. I figured there were motion sensors everywhere. Flint was the last to enter. With a cautious step, he finally walked into the entryway and watched the door close silently behind him. Once closed, the sound of a large metal bolt sliding into place echoed in the foyer. From the tight frown on Flint’s face, I guessed he didn’t like that.

I did, though. This house felt safe. There was no way anyone could enter uninvited.

“There are seven bedrooms on the main level and three downstairs.” Conroy nodded down a hall. “Kitchen’s down on the right, three bedrooms and the master beyond that. Three additional bedrooms are in the other

wing, past the library and study." He walked into the open living space just beyond the foyer. Lights clicked on with each step.

I stopped mid-stride, my mouth dropping. The house was huge and completely decorated. Modern décor filled the space, not like the plush sofas in Pete and Val's house, but it did match the architecture. The thing that made me gape, however, was how ridiculously expensive everything looked. The furniture screamed *money*.

We followed Conroy into the living room. Three large couches and several chairs filled the space. With small end tables placed strategically, one would never have to reach far for a drink. Beyond the living room stood a wall of windows. The grounds behind the house were also lit up from pale security lights. Expertly landscaped desert plants and stone walkways weaved throughout the impressive backyard. A large pergola and barbecue area with outdoor seating interwove in the design. It fit perfectly into the environment. In the distance, an intimidating wall was visible. It seemed the entire grounds were fenced off by a solid, smooth enclosure.

"A bit like Fort Knox," Jasper commented.

Conroy nodded. "I purchased this property because of the security."

"So where's this drug?" Di's gaze grew shrewd when she crossed her arms.

At the mention of the memory drug, I perked up.

"In my study," Conroy replied. "However, I think we should wait until morning to administer it. I'd like to check that vehicle license plate first, and proper administration and monitoring of the drug will take all day."

"Not to mention, we haven't decided if *anyone* should take it." Flint pulled me closely to him.

"Fine by me." Jacinda yawned. "Is there a shower around here?"

"Each room has its own bathroom," Conroy replied. "If you all want to clean up, I'll prepare a quick dinner. Feel free to wander throughout the house and get acquainted with the rooms. This home is yours now too."

"Lovely." Jacinda picked up her Louis Vuitton and walked down the hall. With her expertly styled hair and statuesque figure, Jacinda fit into this environment perfectly.

"Are we all sleeping on this level?" Amber's dark brown hair, styled in a pixie haircut, stood out at all angles. The long day on the road and frantic zigzagging through the desert was evident in all of us.

“That depends if you want to share rooms or not,” Conroy replied. “There are enough bedrooms for everyone to sleep individually, or if you want to share, that’s fine too. Whatever you all prefer.”

“Which room’s yours?” I asked.

Conroy nodded in the direction Jacinda had gone. “The master’s that way.”

Di lifted her bag. “I’ll take the one closest to yours.”

“Jet, Amber and I can take the three down by the study,” Jasper said.

Mica sighed. “Then I guess I’ll take the other one down there.”

“Which means you two get to take the bedrooms downstairs,” Amber said to me and Flint.

I slung my backpack over my shoulder. “Works for me.”

“I get dibs on the bedroom with the biggest shower,” Jet said. With that, he, Jasper and Amber raced down the hall. Within minutes, laughter echoed from their wing.

Mica scowled and muttered something before stalking down the hall after Jacinda. That left me, Flint, Di and Conroy in the living room.

“Shall I give you a tour of the downstairs?” Conroy asked.

“No, we’ll manage.” Flint picked up both of our bags. A seamless glass railing was all that divided the hallway from the stairwell. In his typical speed, he disappeared into the cavernous depth below.

I gave Conroy an apologetic look. “He doesn’t mean to be rude.”

Conroy stared after Flint. When his gaze met mine, he smiled. The smile didn’t reach his eyes. “Yes, he does,” he replied quietly. “Take your time down there. Dinner will be in an hour.”

Conroy turned to Di. “Would you like me to show you the rooms?” They headed in the direction Mica and Jacinda had gone and spoke quietly as they walked down the hall.

I followed Flint, holding carefully onto the glass railing with one hand as I walked downstairs. My other hand clung to my backpack. Each step was a floating, metal slab. I could see myself either tripping or falling through the gaping hole where a backboard would have been on normal steps.

“Lena?” Flint whispered.

I caught his scent before I saw him. Spice, wood and tangerines. The next second he was at my side, smiling. His strong, steady hands easily encircled my waist. Without asking if I needed help, he lifted me as if I

weighed no more than a cotton ball. I sailed down the rest of the stairs in his arms. When we reached the bottom, he let go.

I raised an eyebrow. “I was doing just fine on my own.”

He grinned. “Are the others staying upstairs?”

“I think so.”

“Come on, I want to show you something.” He pulled me before I could protest.

An entire wall of glass also encompassed the basement wall, similar to upstairs. The home was apparently a walk-out, built into a hillside. When we reached a panel, Flint pushed against something. A section of the glass slid open. Another bizarre door.

“How did you . . . .” I shook my head and dropped my backpack on the floor. “What about the security system?”

“I saw the combination Conroy punched in. Since there isn’t a biometric scanner for this one, I deactivated it down here.”

“You *deactivated* it?” I tried to sound scolding, but the playful look in Flint’s eyes dulled any concerns for our safety. Flint was rarely playful, and since he was like this when Conroy’s antidote loomed in our minds, I knew something was up.

“Follow me.” He tugged me out through the glass door, or wall, or whatever it was. Cool, evening air swam around us. The air was dry but crisp and held unfamiliar desert scents.

I stopped just after the threshold. “What about drones?”

Flint rolled his eyes. “Babe, there are no drones. Conroy’s paranoid.”

My feet were the only thing that made a sound. Flint, as usual, seemed to glide along the pebbles in his usual graceful walk. As if he was a ghost floating through the night.

We continued along the pathway, in and out of landscaped desert plants. The house disappeared behind us. The dark walled perimeter I had seen from upstairs grew larger. The sound of trickling water reached my ears a moment later. A fountain appeared. I guessed it hadn’t dropped below freezing if the thing still ran. From the cool mountain air, freezing temps were to come.

We sailed past the fountain and didn’t stop until we reached a small rock garden.

“Lie down.” Flint pointed to something on the ground.

“What’s that?”

“A blanket. I took it off one of the beds.”

I glanced back at the house. “How’d you get it out here?”

“I did a quick run of the perimeter and grounds while you were talking to Conroy. This place sits on at least five acres.”

I rolled my eyes but couldn’t help my smile. Flint still seemed somewhat oblivious to how unique his gift was. He probably patrolled the grounds in under a minute, while it would have taken a normal human around twenty.

“Do you think Conroy would approve?”

Flint grunted. “I could care less if he approves.”

Right, case closed. I sat on the blanket and drew my knees up.

In a flash, Flint lay beside me. Moonlight shimmered off his chestnut locks. That playful look was back on his face.

“What did you want to show me?” I smiled and savored his perpetual warmth. My sweater was no match for the cold temperature.

“Lie flat.”

I lay down, the small pebbles underneath the blanket shifting with my weight. I raised my eyebrows expectantly.

He grinned. “Look up.”

I did as he said and gasped. “Wow . . .”

“Incredible, isn’t it?”

I knew a lot of telescopes were built in high mountain deserts. The low humidity and lesser particles in the air, along with the higher elevation, allowed scientists a clearer picture of space. However, I’d never actually *seen* the night sky under such conditions. I’d only read about it in books I had checked out from Little Raven’s library.

The view above me was too beautiful for words. The entire sky was a shimmering array of stars. The cloudy Milky Way trailed across its midst, like an opaque ribbon stretching from horizon to horizon. The night sky here was so bright and abundant. I’d never realized how much we were missing at the ranch.

“This is amazing!” I breathed.

“I’ve already seen eight satellites.”

“You have?”

He pointed up. “There’s another one.”

I followed his finger. Sure enough, a tiny dot sailed in a steady line across the sky. We both watched until it disappeared.

“Does this remind you of anything?”

I smiled. “Yeah, although the sky’s better here.”

Back at Hideaway Hills ranch, only weeks ago, we sneaked away frequently to be alone. Often, we’d lay on the grass, staring at the night sky, just like we were right now. Flint and I both loved backyard astronomy. It was one of the many things we had in common.

We lay quietly for a while. I inched closer to his side and let his radiating warmth keep the chill away.

“It’s so quiet out here.”

He grumbled a response and stroked my hair. The fleeting movement sent tingles down my spine. I expected kisses on my neck to follow with some clothes being removed after that, but his hands stayed put.

“Babe?”

Something in his voice made me pause. “Yeah?”

“Are you really going through with it tomorrow?” His words were soft, yet I heard the catch in them.

“You mean the antidote? Yes.”

“Why?” he whispered.

I leaned up on an elbow to meet his gaze. “Do you really need to ask? I want to know about my life. I want to remember everything I’ve done.”

“Even if there are consequences?”

“Such as?”

“Side effects for one. We don’t know what this drug will do to us. Remember, these drugs are mind altering. One bad reaction and our brains could be fried.”

I frowned. “Yeah, I know, but this drug is much safer than the ones we received as babies. The chances of that happening are rare.”

“So you still want to do it?”

“Conroy tried it. Nothing happened to him.”

Flint guffawed. “Conroy *says* he tried it. I trust Conroy about as far as I can throw him.”

I swallowed a smile. “You could probably throw him pretty far.”

Flint tried to scowl, but his lips tugged up. “You know what I mean.”

I sighed. “Yes, but *I* trust him. I don’t know what else you want me to say.”

Flint glanced away, his profile a shadowy line. “Why do you need to know what our lives were like? Isn’t this enough? What we have now? Why

do you need to risk that?”

“Of course I don’t want to risk this, but I need to know what happened to me. Don’t you want to remember your life too?”

A dark emotion flashed across his face before he masked it.

“What are you afraid of?” I asked quietly.

He shook his head, his eyes downcast.

“Flint. Talk to me.”

He sighed harshly. “I just don’t want anything to happen to you.”

I tilted his chin toward me, forcing his gaze to meet mine. “There’s something more than that. I can tell.”

He looked away again. “It’s nothing.”

“Flint, you can tell me.”

“It’s dumb,” he said so quietly, I had to strain to hear. “I’m not sure I want to remember . . . what they did to me.”

“Oh,” I breathed.

I felt so stupid I hadn’t put two and two together. Of course. Flint was the oldest in the group. Conroy had mentioned that Flint remembered more about O’Brien than any of us. He’d been eight years old when Conroy took us away. I’d only been five. I’d be lucky if I remembered more than a few details, but Flint would probably remember *years* of details.

“So you’re afraid of what you’ll remember?”

He shrugged. “I think I’m more afraid of how I’ll react.”

“What do you mean?”

The strained look in his eyes made my heart ache. They were the eyes of a little boy. “What if it changes me?”

I took a deep breath. *What can I say to that? It won’t. Everything will be fine.* It was a cliché response, but I wasn’t one to make promises I couldn’t keep.

“It could,” I finally said. “I wish I could say it won’t change you, but I don’t know that.”

“And what if it changes you too?”

I cocked my head. “Do you think it would? Even though I was so young when we left O’Brien?”

He shrugged. “Or what if we both remember things that make us feel differently about one another?”

I shook my head. “No. No, I’m sure that won’t happen. Remember what Conroy said? He said you’ve always been protective of me. And

remember the way we both reacted when we saw each other for the first time two months ago? There's no way we'd feel that way if this wasn't real. I'm sure of that. Whatever that drug does to us tomorrow, it won't change how we feel for one another."

He smiled. "You sound so convinced."

"Because I am."

Flint sighed and pulled me to him. He resumed stroking my hair.

"There's no way I'm going to talk you out of this, is there?"

I shook my head.

He sighed heavily. "Then I guess that means I'm taking it too."

"You don't have to. Conroy said you don't have additional powers to remember. There's no reason you have to take it."

"You really think I'd let you take it first, without me knowing what it could do to you?"

My lips parted. "You mean the only reason you're taking it is to make sure nothing bad happens to *me*?"

"I'll never let anything hurt you."

My stomach dropped. "Flint, you don't need to do that."

"And you think I'd ever forgive myself if something bad happened? Especially something I could have prevented?" Before I could say anything, he added, "No, if you're taking this drug, then I'm taking it, and I'm taking it first."

A heavy ache settled in my chest. I didn't want him to do this for me, but the other part of me knew I was wasting my breath by arguing. When Flint's mind was made up, nothing could sway it. I'd learned that months ago.

"I would try to talk you out of it, but I know there's no use."

"You know me well." He pulled me closer. "I can't let you take that drug without me knowing what it will do. Will you let me?"

I hugged him tighter and gazed at the stars. I didn't know how to make him understand that I felt the same way. I'd do anything to keep him from being hurt, but he'd never let me put myself at risk for him.

I chewed my lip and wondered if taking Conroy's antidote was the right thing to do after all—additional abilities be damned.

CHAPTER FIVE

We didn't eat dinner until ten o'clock. Flint and I both returned to the backyard following the meal. I had no idea how long we stayed outside. I must have fallen asleep while we lay under the stars, and Flint must have carried me back inside.

I woke in a large bed. Soft, warm sheets and a thick duvet covered me. My eyes opened to a mass of hair in my face. I reached over, expecting to feel Flint.

The empty bed greeted me.

Pushing up, I blew curls out of my eyes and surveyed my surroundings. I had no memory of moving into a bedroom and mused that I could have sleepwalked here. I did have a history of that.

Disappointment strummed through me that I was alone. Flint and I had never slept beside one another. Not really at least. It had been too hard at the ranch since we tried to respect our roommates. None of them appreciated our kissing and petting on display. Not to mention twin sized beds weren't exactly practical for that sort of thing.

My fingers drifted to the indent lining the pillow beside me. I leaned down and inhaled. Flint's unique scent wafted up. So he *had* slept here. I smiled, but then a frown tugged at my lips. We still hadn't *slept* together, though. Well, at least not that I knew of. Perhaps we had before we re-met in August, but I simply didn't remember it.

Flint's distant figure abruptly appeared in the bedroom door. He was pacing in the large family room outside the bedroom. After a few paces, he stopped and stood quietly by the wall of windows. He gazed at the desert landscape, hands stuffed in his jean pockets, his profile a chiseled line. In the sun, his beautiful chestnut hair shone with dark streaks of gold.

I got up and quickly dressed. When I approached him, he didn't seem to know I was there. I encircled his waist from behind and buried my face between his shoulder blades.

"Good morning." His voice was a deep rumble.

“Morning, did you sleep at all?”

“A few hours.”

“Flint? Lena?” a voice called from the stairs. It was Di. “Are you two coming up?”

Flint turned and gave me a brief hug. Dark circles lined his eyes. “Let’s go.”

I glanced at the clock when we all gathered in the living room. It was almost ten in the morning. Everyone else was up and talking nervously to one another. From the whispered comments, it sounded as if everyone knew about the “additional abilities” that Conroy had told us about in the car. Despite the chance of side effects, most seemed eager to take it.

Conroy had sold his drug well. If we wanted to defeat O’Brien, what better way to do that than to present our strongest selves?

The older scientist was nowhere to be seen. I approached Di. That manic gleam was in her eyes again. “Do you know if Conroy discovered anything about that man in the sedan?”

Di sipped her coffee and nodded. “He came back clean. His description matches the driver’s license photo of the man registered to that vehicle.”

“So he doesn’t work for O’Brien? They don’t know we’re here?”

“No, not yet.”

Not yet. Right.

Nervous energy churned in me when I walked into the kitchen for a cup of coffee. When I returned, Flint was standing in front of the windows again. He stood like he had been in the basement: still, not moving. He looked like a statue, hard marble carved with graceful strokes. His gaze was trained on something in the distance. I could only imagine what he was thinking.

The sky was overcast with spurts of blue intermingled among the white cloud cover. Mountains bathed in snow surrounded the rolling hills. The high mountain desert was beautiful, and in a way, reminded me of Hideaway Hills.

Jacinda appeared at my side. “Are you nervous?” Her honey-brown eyes were especially bright this morning. Dark circles also lined her eyes. It seemed everyone was on edge.

“A little. You?”

She nodded.

Mica approached. She held up a plate of food. “Conroy made quite the spread in there. Eggs, bacon, hash browns, sausage, you name it. You guys eat yet?”

We both shook our heads.

“Better get some before it’s all gone!” Mica said cheerfully before taking a big bite of eggs.

I smiled. Mica’s appetite hadn’t diminished in the slightest since leaving Hideaway Hills. It didn’t seem the prospect of being drugged and potentially suffering severe side effects affected it.

“I think I’ll wait until we’re done.” I was too nervous to eat, which was probably an absolute first for me. Food and I usually got along quite well, but I kept thinking about what Flint was doing. For me.

“I’ll stick with the coffee.” Jacinda held up the steaming mug in her hand.

Mica shrugged. “Suit yourself.” She ambled toward Jet and Jasper. For once, Amber wasn’t with them. Mica smiled brightly at Jasper when she reached his side.

I glanced at Flint. He still hadn’t moved.

“All right, everyone, gather round.” Conroy emerged from the hallway. He carried a briefcase and was dressed more elegantly than I’d ever seen. Tan dress pants, a navy sweater and a button up shirt underneath. The pants were smooth, the sweater tailored perfectly. Everything about his clothes hinted at money. I wondered if the outdoor gear he’d been wearing since we met wasn’t his usual attire. Perhaps this was.

I frowned. Those thoughts only made me realize that Flint may be right. We didn’t know Conroy at all. I switched my vision. Conroy’s beautiful rainbow cloud appeared. It billowed around his shoulders. Despite the faint colors, it was vibrant and unique. My worry evaporated. An instinct deep inside of me told me that I could trust Conroy. I trusted my instinct. It had kept me alive during my homeless months.

Flint finally turned from the window, his expression stony. For a brief second, it faltered. Once again, a fleeting glimpse of fear emerged.

My shoulders slumped. He was doing this for me and only me. It didn’t seem he was remotely interested in our childhood or pasts. He was happy to live in the present, but he didn’t want to risk me being hurt by the drug, so he was going to take it first. Never mind that the drug may affect

each of us differently. Never mind that one of us may experience side effects that the other didn't. He would still insist on going ahead of me.

I stepped closer to him. Flint put his arm around my shoulders and gripped me tightly. Leaning down, he buried his nose in my hair and inhaled.

I squeezed him back.

Conroy stepped into the middle of the living room. Everyone formed a circle around him, including Amber, who had finally appeared. Conroy put a strange looking briefcase on the center coffee table. It opened with a hiss, revealing rows of glass vials.

Conroy removed several vials and a handful of incredibly long syringes. My eyes widened.

"The drug will need to be injected. It's not an easy procedure as it requires a lumbar puncture. From there, it will travel up the spinal column before it passes through the blood brain barrier. I'll only be able to inject one of you at a time, and you'll need to be monitored afterward. This will most likely take all day."

"I can help," Di said. "It'll go faster if I help."

Conroy smiled, a knowing glint in his eyes. "If you'd like to help, Diamond, I'd appreciate your assistance."

I marveled again that Di was a doctor. Apparently, Conroy had taught her, and although she didn't hold an official degree, she was a very talented physician.

"I'll let all of you decide who will go first," Conroy continued. "From there—"

"Wait a minute," Flint interrupted. His entire body tensed against me as a push of power rolled off him.

I gasped when it hit me. It felt like a hot wave as powerful as the surf pounding the shore.

"You said this requires a lumbar puncture?" Flint asked.

Conroy nodded. "Correct."

"But if that's true, how did you administer the drug to yourself?"

The nervous whispering that had been traveling in the living room stopped.

"You claim to have already taken it," Flint said tightly. "Yet you couldn't have given it to yourself, could you?"

I stopped breathing. Flint was right. There was no way Conroy could have injected this drug into himself.

"You're right," Conroy replied calmly. "I didn't give it to myself. Diamond did."

A few gasps sounded. My gaze darted to Di's.

Di looked as surprised as the rest of us. "I did?"

The silence resumed before Mica sat down heavily on one of the couches. I followed suit before pulling Flint down too. I faintly registered how uncomfortable the hard, angular sofa was.

"That means Di knew about this drug," Jasper said slowly. "Before it was given to us . . ."

Jasper eyed his brother. Their features became a rotating display of every emotional expression. I had no idea what they were saying to one another.

Given what he just revealed, I couldn't help but question Conroy's sincerity. It was obvious Flint felt the same. The powerful, hot feeling pouring off him kicked up a notch.

"Is it true?" Jacinda pierced Conroy and Di with suspicious looks. "Did you do this together?"

Conroy sighed. "Yes, Diamond knew about the drugs—"

The energy in the room exploded.

I switched my vision. Everyone's clouds had quadrupled in size.

Di collapsed onto a chair, wide-eyed. I think it was the first time I'd seen her speechless. Jet and Jasper began shouting accusations, telepathy forgotten. Mica appeared dumbstruck, while Amber practically fell off the couch. Flint remained motionless as hot energy rolled off him.

"Let me finish," Conroy stated calmly but loudly.

It took a few moments before everyone quieted down. When they did, Conroy said, "Diamond knew about the drugs, but she did *not* know I intended to use them on you."

"How could she not know?" Jet's blue eyes flashed dangerously.

Conroy shook his head. "I was always manufacturing drugs. That was nothing new, and you were all aware of that. I'm a biomedical chemist. It's what I've been doing for over thirty years. My work didn't stop because we left society. In fact, all of you helped me at one point or another."

"In that lab under the cabin?" I asked.

“Yes. All of you worked in the lab at various times. That’s where I spent most of my days. Believe it or not, you all know more about chemistry than most chemistry majors.”

Mica’s forehead scrunched up. “We do?”

Conroy smiled, as I almost did, at her stumped expression. “Yes, Mica, you do. Living in the Forbidden Hills for fifteen years gave all of you plenty of time to learn more than most graduates.”

Everyone grew silent again.

I took a deep breath. So far, Conroy had an explanation for everything. Any time anything questionable had arisen, he had been able to give an immediate rational explanation. I figured that could mean one of two things. One, he was telling the truth, or two, he was a good liar who thought quickly on his feet. He was a genius after all. The second option could very well be the reality.

I leaned back on the uncomfortable sofa. I’d trusted Conroy from the first moment we’d met. I knew it came down to two choices. I could either choose to continue trusting him. Or, I could choose Flint’s path and second guess everything Conroy said.

I switched my vision. Once again, a rainbow of colors appeared in Conroy’s cloud. So many colors. *Why is his cloud like that?*

The only similarity to the eight of our clouds and Conroy’s was the bright blue. However, that was where the similarities ended. The eight of us only had two colors in our clouds—a single color that was unique to each of us mixed with the bright blue. None of us had dozens of colors like Conroy, but the blue in our clouds *did* match the blue in Conroy’s.

My mouth fell open. I studied everyone’s colors again. I bit my lip. A theory grew in my mind for *why* we had colorful clouds. However, there was only one way to know for sure if that theory was correct.

Conroy continued on. “I’m not forcing this drug on any of you, but I am recommending it. If you want to defeat O’Brien, you’ll need to be strong. Your memories are one way to help that. If you choose to take it, I will gladly administer it, but if you do not want to take it, that is entirely your choice.”

Everyone eyed one another. It seemed from most of our expressions, the others had reached the same conclusion as me. We either chose to trust Conroy or we didn’t. Regardless, the choice was ours.

“I’m still doing it,” I replied. “I’ll go first.”

Flint tensed. “No, you won’t. I’m first.”

I sighed. I knew he wouldn’t let me, but I figured it was worth a try. I still wanted to give him an out if he had changed his mind.

“You could both have it done at the same time,” Di offered, shaking herself out of silence. “Conroy could inject one of you, and I could inject the other.”

Flint gave Di a sharp look.

Di took a step back. “Right,” she said matter-of-factly. “Lena won’t be going first.”

“I’ll go then,” Mica volunteered, standing up. “If that’s okay, Lena?”

I rolled my eyes. “It’s fine.”

Flint turned to me while Conroy led Mica to a table he had set up. “Promise me you won’t go until I’m done,” he whispered.

My breath sucked in at the emotion in Flint’s dark eyes. Once again, they were full of fear. My annoyance vanished as I pulled him into a tight hug. “I promise.”

“Flint?” Di called. She stood by the second table. “You can lie here.”

Conroy was already prepping Mica’s back for the puncture. A large swab of iodine painted her skin orange.

Flint leaned down. He kissed me softly. “Remember your promise.”

In a flash, he was on the table. The movement caused the air to stir and ruffle my hair. “Promise,” I repeated, more to myself than him.

Tears moistened my eyes. I wasn’t sure why, but I was suddenly a jumble of emotions. They flooded me, as if everything inside of me was a whirlpool, swirling about. I couldn’t really explain why I felt this way. Maybe it was the vulnerable position Flint lay in, on his side in a fetal position, his back bare. Or maybe it was fear of the unknown.

I didn’t know.

Di prepped Flint’s back. I hunkered at his side. Flint’s face was expressionless, his gaze blank. Conroy began drawing up the drug into the large syringes.

Jacinda kneeled beside me and put an arm around my shoulders. “He’ll be okay.”

I numbly watched Conroy and Di at work.

Even though I trusted Conroy, I momentarily panicked when Di administered the serum. I almost lunged forward but Jacinda stopped me, her finely boned hands gently yet firmly gripping my arms.

Flint didn’t utter a sound. A few seconds after the serum was in, his eyes closed and he slumped onto the table. My gaze whipped to Conroy.

Conroy smiled sympathetically. “Unconsciousness is expected. The alterations the drugs demand remap one’s brain. To cope, the mind shuts down while letting the drug work its course. He’ll be unconscious for a few hours.”

I couldn’t take my eyes off Flint.

He lay deathly still.

THE REST OF the morning passed in a blur. Jasper stayed at my side. He decided to not take the drug until he knew how Jet faired. It seemed reasonable to assume that if one twin had a bad reaction, the other would as well. Jacinda had been hesitant too, but in the end, she seemed to feel similar to me. Wanting to know our pasts trumped potential side effects. She currently lay unconscious on the table along with the others.

Di and Conroy carefully walked between everyone while monitoring their vitals.

Since the lumbar puncture was a sterile procedure and required checks for bleeding and hematomas, it took hours of monitoring afterward. I think I’d once known that. Something faintly registered in my mind, no doubt another long buried memory trying to break free. That had happened periodically over the past six months. All of us randomly remembered things, things that had escaped Conroy’s drug. Frustratingly, however, none of those things had alluded to our identities. They’d simply been things we’d once known, probably what Conroy had taught us. Apparently, it wasn’t only Di who’d been educated in medicine since I faintly remembered a thing or two about lumbar punctures.

Di and Conroy worked seamlessly throughout the morning as I paced the living room. From the synchronicity with which they moved, I guessed it wasn’t the first time they’d worked together. Di seemed to anticipate Conroy’s every need and vice versa. If any of us had spent a lot of time with Conroy in his lab, I was guessing it was Di.

By the time the afternoon rolled around, I’d stopped pacing and opted for hovering at Flint’s side. Di lay on her side as Conroy prepped her back. I barely glanced their way. My gaze wouldn’t leave Flint.

Flint’s pulse was strong and steady. His face twitched and moved, while his eyeballs shifted rapidly beneath his lids. I asked Conroy if that

was normal.

“Yes. That’s the last stage before waking up. He’s processing memories right now like a dream. When he wakes, they’ll slowly all return to him, and he’ll realize they were never dreams at all but memories.”

I clasped Flint’s hand tightly as I waited for him to wake.

I prayed he’d be okay.

FLINT WOKE MID-AFTERNOON. He was the first to wake. The second he did he squeezed my hand tightly. I snapped my head up from where I’d been resting it on my forearm. His eyes were open, his gaze clear.

“Are you okay?” The anxiety in my voice was evident, even to me.

He didn’t respond. Instead, he smiled and squeezed my hand. “Lena . . .” he whispered.

I covered his hand with both of mine. “Are you okay?”

He nodded. “It worked. I remember.”

“Everything?” I knew he would understand that I was referring to O’Brien Pharmaceuticals. Our earliest memories there.

His smile disappeared. For the briefest moment, he frowned. “Yes, everything.”

“And you’re okay? You don’t regret doing it?”

The frown vanished. “If you only knew . . .”

I waited for him to continue. He didn’t. “If I only knew what?”

“You’ll see.”

I cocked my head.

“Galena?” Conroy called. “Are you ready?”

I squeezed Flint’s hand again. “So you’re okay with me doing this?” I didn’t tell him that my mind was made up. I was doing it whether he agreed with me or not.

“I’m okay with it.”

I stood and swallowed audibly before walking to the other table. I lay on my side. In a flash, Flint was holding my hand. The latest drug obviously hadn’t affected his ability. I sighed in relief.

“I’m going to swab you first.” Conroy lifted the hem of my shirt and draped sterile fabric over me.

“All right,” I mumbled. Something cold slid across my lower back.

“After I’ve prepped the area, I’ll inject you with lidocaine to numb the pain. It’ll feel like a burning sensation but it will be over quickly.”

I nodded as best I could in the awkward position.

“When I inject the drug, you may feel some sensations as it travels up your spine to your brain. Don’t be alarmed if you do.”

Flint cloud radiated love and warmth. Any trepidation I had vanished. I trusted Conroy, and I trusted Flint. I knew Flint wouldn’t let anything bad happen to me. If he was okay with me doing this, then I knew I’d be fine.

“I’m ready,” I said.

Conroy flicked a syringe. “Here’s the lidocaine.”

A sharp prick pierced my back. A stinging sensation followed. It wasn’t as bad as I thought it would be, kind of like a bee sting. It quickly vanished and then I felt nothing but small points of pressure as Conroy injected more lidocaine.

After a few moments, he said, “I’m going to administer the drug now, Galena.”

I felt more pressure in my spine and then a popping sensation. It was completely painless, but at Conroy’s instruction, I lay completely still.

“The drug is going in now.”

A warm sensation flowed into me. It was a strange feeling, like molten molasses coating my spinal cord. I felt the drug move up and up. It started in my lumbar area and then moved to my transverse vertebrae and last to the cervical area. When it reached the base of my skull, an explosion of light flashed across my eyes. It felt as though heat coated the inside of my mind.

A flash of panic engulfed me. I had no idea if that feeling was to be expected or not.

I wasn’t not sure if I made a sound. In a way, it felt like I was no longer in my body. Things grew heavy as a pressure rose in my mind. It felt as if someone was putting layer after layer of heavy lead on my consciousness. I abruptly felt tired. So tired.

I fought it for as long as I could. The last thing I remembered was Flint’s face as he kneeled beside me. His image swam in and out of focus as my lids opened and closed, but then my lids grew too heavy. Flint whispered something in my ear.

I didn’t know what he said before everything went dark.

CHAPTER SIX

14 years old

All nine of us hiked through The Forbidden Hills, walking up the steep terrain to the cliff where the helicopter landed. The moon smiled down, the air crisp and full of wet, night scents. We carried packs containing the items Father would dispose of. Recyclable items, used lab equipment, food packaging that couldn't be burned and buried.

Flint walked right behind me, but for the first time in the past year, I was more consumed with something other than him.

I was going on a helicopter.

I was going to a real city!

A few years ago, Father started taking us on individual trips into the real world. He knew how much we wanted to see life outside of our secluded cabin. It was almost a rite of passage. When Father deemed we were mature enough to understand the gravity of leaving our mountain, he arranged the short trip. But it was one trip only. He said it was too dangerous to go more than that. The men at that place were still looking for us.

Flint, Di, Jacinda, the twins and Mica had already gone. This year, it was my turn. Fourteen years old, and I was *finally* going to see how the rest of the world lived.

"Are you excited?" Jacinda asked from ahead.

I nodded vigorously. "Yes, I can't wait!"

I glanced over my shoulder. When Flint's and my eyes met, I thought he frowned, but it was hard to tell in the night. He'd been like that all day, more quiet than usual. I bit my lip and turned around. I hoped he wasn't mad at me, but I couldn't think of any reason why he would be. I grumbled. That was another change I'd been dealing with over the past year. Obsessing when I thought something was wrong between Flint and me.

“Almost there,” Father called, pulling me from my mulling.

The trees ended. The large meadow on the cliff’s edge appeared. Silvery moonlight illuminated the rocky terrain.

I switched my vision. Everyone’s clouds appeared. The single colors danced above all of us, but Father’s rainbow cloud was the prettiest even though it was so faint.

Before I got my first period, everything other than the clouds had been out of focus, but with Father’s help that had improved. Now, I could see things clearly while also seeing clouds. Even more exciting, Father said with time I may be able to control a person’s cloud. He said something about harnessing their energy. We hadn’t worked on that yet.

Father put his GPS away and glanced at the sky.

“How long till the helicopter gets here?” Jet asked. He stood beside Jasper and Mica. As was becoming the norm, Mica and Jasper stood side by side.

Conroy illuminated his digital watch. “It’s seven minutes to eleven. We have a few minutes.”

I swallowed nervously and switched my vision back to normal. The clearing once again became swamped in the moonlight.

I caught Flint’s scent a second before he stood beside me. His silent approach was like a cougar’s. Clasping my hands, I waited for him to talk. I knew he’d wanted to say something all day.

He cleared his throat. “First time on a chopper. You must be excited.”

“Very.”

He shuffled his feet. A few pebbles skittered along the cliff. “It’s a different place out there, compared to what we’re used to.”

“Hmm, yeah.” My excitement for the chopper ride dimmed in his presence. I wouldn’t see Flint for three days. Three *days*. After a lifetime of him at my side, a few days seemed like an eternity.

“Do you think you’ll want to come back?”

“Yeah.” I glanced up, having to crane my neck. At seventeen, Flint was tall—at least a foot taller than me. “Why wouldn’t I?”

His eyes were dark in the night, his features grim. “I know how restless you get. How you want to know what it’s like out there.”

I grinned. “I can’t wait to see it.”

Flint put his hands on my shoulders, his frown deepening. His touch stopped my breath. He hardly ever touched me, not like this. “Promise me

something?”

His frantic whisper wiped the grin off my face. I nodded mutely.

“Listen to Conroy. Always. You don’t know what it was like . . . at that place. If they were to find you . . .” He paused. “Promise me you’ll follow Conroy’s instructions. If he tells you to do something, don’t question him, just do it.”

I licked my lips. I hadn’t thought about that place or those men in so long. It felt like another lifetime ago. I’d been so young when we left. An image of the bad man with the black cloud flashed through my mind. I shook it off.

“Promise?” Flint said again. The chopper sounded in the distance.

“Yeah, I promise.”

His grip relaxed as he dropped his hands from my shoulders.

When the chopper touched down, Father rushed to its side. He motioned to Flint.

Flint whizzed around, collecting our packs and throwing them in the back of the chopper. When the cargo was stowed, Father held his hand out to me.

Before I could take it, Flint stepped in my path. His hair flew around his forehead, but the charged look in his eyes . . .

He leaned down until his lips touched my ear. I shivered. “Don’t forget your promise.”

“Galena!” Father called. “We must go!”

The anxiety in Father’s voice was evident amidst the deafening chopper. The cliff top was well out of view from the distant towns and ranches, and helicopters were used commonly for herding cattle, but Father still worried. Locals might question why they heard the occasional faint sound of a chopper at night. So far, we’d manage to avoid anybody knowing that we lived in the Forbidden Hills. Hiding was key to survival, at least according to Father.

I sprinted to the door and hopped inside. Everyone waved goodbye. The moonlight illuminated their excited expressions. Even Di smiled. Flint, however, stood in the back of the group, his hands stuffed in his jean pockets, his expression somber.

I swallowed.

Three days.

A second later, we were off. My stomach flipped when the helicopter lurched to the side. All thoughts of Flint vanished. The ground disappeared beneath us as we flew forward. I almost laughed. I'd never experienced anything like this!

Father turned in his seat. His voice sounded in my ear. The ear muffs he'd put on me apparently had speakers in them.

"We'll fly to Jackson, Wyoming. From there, we'll take my plane to Seattle. We should arrive by five in the morning."

Once in Seattle, we'd have three full days before we'd return to the cabin. The others had told me that Father would dedicate two of those days solely to me. He'd indulge me in anything I wanted to do.

I couldn't wait!

I FELL ASLEEP somewhere over Wyoming. The next thing I knew, Father was gently shaking me. "Galena, wake up," he whispered. "We're in Seattle."

Rubbing my eyes, I peered around. We were no longer in the helicopter but a plane.

"I carried you from the chopper. You were sound asleep."

He ushered me out of the plane to a waiting car. Red glowed on the horizon. The scream of jet planes sounded from the distant commercial runway. We appeared to be at a smaller section of the airport.

I paused a moment to stare at everything. I'd never seen planes before, not close like this. I'd never seen a car either outside of a movie.

Smiling, I ran my hand along the car's exterior. It was cool to the touch and very smooth. Father nudged me gently toward the open door. My smile vanished. Father continually glanced around, his brow furrowed, his mouth tensed.

I remembered Flint's warning.

We left the airport and pulled onto a large road. Road signs flashed by the window. Any thoughts about those men and that bad place vanished. I almost giggled. This was an *interstate*. I knew all about them from the Transportation class Father taught a few years ago in our Real Life course. The Real Life courses in our homeschool were my favorite. Father said it was important that we understood how society worked. He said the stuff in our Real Life courses was normally learned from living in society, but since we didn't live in society, we needed to be taught it.

I cupped my chin in my hand and stared out the window. A car passed us. A baby sat in a *car seat* in the backseat. I'd never seen a baby in my life!

About half an hour later, we pulled off the interstate onto a smaller road and drove to another smaller street until we pulled into a driveway. Large, metal gates blocked it from the road. The driver opened his window and punched in a code. The gates swung open.

"We'll stay here for the next three days," Father said.

"Where are we?"

"Just outside Seattle."

"Do you own this house?"

Father shook his head. "It's a rental."

We drove forward. My eyes widened at what appeared. The house was very different from the cabin. I stared in awe. It was huge! Ivory pillars adorned the front. Vines snaked up the sides. The exterior walls were white and had dozens of windows.

It was beautiful.

After he parked, the driver opened my door. I wanted so badly to say hello but remembered Father's rule. No talking to anyone unless necessary. Sighing, I followed Father.

"I've hired a small staff to tend to our needs," Father said quietly. "You can talk freely to them but not about anything regarding your life or our pasts. Understood?" His tone was gentle yet firm.

"Yes, I understand."

Two people stood with clasped hands at the front door. Father introduced me to them. I eagerly held out my hand to the woman. It was something we'd learned in Etiquette class. We'd all practiced shaking hands with one another back home, but this was the first time I'd been able to do it in real life with a real stranger.

"It's nice to meet you." I shook her hand. "My name's Lena."

"My name's Rose."

I switched my vision. Her cloud billowed white. *That's weird. She doesn't have any colors.*

Regardless, I liked her immediately but had to make myself not stare. That was also something we'd learned in Etiquette course. Staring was rude, but it was hard not to. Rose was the first person I'd met who was a woman around Father's age. Similar to Father, little wrinkles creased her

eyes, and dry skin lined her palm when our hands shook. It was not only exhilarating, but it made me pause. *If I had a mother, would she look like Rose?*

THE NEXT DAY, Father and I left early. The same driver brought the car around and opened the door for us. When we sped down the driveway, I practically bounced in my seat. “Where are we going?”

“You’ll see.” Father’s eyes twinkled.

The drive away from the house was as exciting as the drive in. We again hopped from highways to interstates as the image of Seattle grew larger and larger. Huge buildings and a pointy structure, which Father called the Space Needle, appeared as we drove toward the city. My nose was glued to the window. I couldn’t believe how big everything was!

The driver swept us through downtown, expertly maneuvering the traffic and streets. So many people were walking around. It was fascinating to look at the different clothes, faces and size of each person. I switched my vision. I expected to see a sea of color staring back at me.

My mouth dropped at what I saw instead.

“Everyone’s white, ivory or gray. And there’s a black one!”

Father pushed a button. A screen lifted that separated us from the driver. “You’ve switched your vision?”

“Yeah, their clouds don’t have colors!”

I snapped my sight back to normal. The black and white spectrum from the people on the streets vanished. “Nobody else has colorful clouds.” I remembered Rose’s white cloud and the other staff member’s ivory cloud. *So that wasn’t unusual?*

“Hmm,” Father said. His hazel eyes brightened as he tapped his chin. “That’s very interesting. We should discuss that later. That could have greater meaning.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

17 years old

Jet and Jasper bounded into our room. “Up and at ‘em girls! Capture the Flag is on!”

Squeals filled the air as the twins poked and tickled the other girls awake. It was Saturday and the first day of summer break. We always started summer with a game outside.

Jet’s head appeared beside mine. Since I slept on the top bunk, we were at eye level. I narrowed my eyes. “Touch me and you’re dead.”

Jet chuckled. “Flint’s not here to save you, Little L.” He lifted his hands and made tickling movements in the air.

I picked up my pillow and whacked him in the head.

A chuckle sounded from the door. Flint lounged against the frame, his arms crossed.

“What was that you were saying?” I asked sweetly.

Jet rubbed his head and glared, but there was still a twinkle in his gaze. “You’re gonna regret that, L. The game’s only just started.”

I smirked. “We’ll see about that, you big bully.”

OUTSIDE, THE SUN tried valiantly to shine through the dense trees. Warm air flowed across my cheeks. All of us wore running shoes or hiking boots. Even Jacinda was dressed ready to get dirty.

Jet crossed his arms. “All right, Father’s put a perimeter around the cabin. We have a mile radius, so if you get to the orange tether, you have to stop and turn back. That’s the only reason he’s okay with this game. Technically, none of us can get *too* lost. Understood?”

All of us voiced understanding. The Forbidden Hills were known for disorienting people. Some referred to it as The Bermuda Triangle of Colorado. It’s why we lived here. Nobody ventured into these Hills.

“So this is how Capture the Flag works . . .” Jet launched into the explanation. From there, we picked teams. Team red was the twins, Amber and Mica. Team yellow was Flint, Di, Jacinda and me.

“Right, everyone has thirty minutes to find where they want to keep their flag.” Jet set the timer on his watch. “In exactly thirty minutes, the game begins!” He grinned gleefully.

Team red jogged into the trees in the direction of the stream. I wondered what the game would be like, considering we’d be running through the forest. The forest could be incredibly disorienting. I figured that would make things more challenging.

“Okay, so where should we put our flag?” Jacinda picked at her nail and made a face at the chipped paint.

“By the cliff?” Di suggested. “The terrain’s really rocky there. It would be harder for them to outrun us.”

Flint took out his compass. “Let’s head that way.”

After twenty yards, I was completely lost as we followed Flint and Di through the forest. I ducked around a tree branch. “This is going to be interesting. We’ll probably all get turned around and not find anything.”

Jacinda nodded. “I’m thinking the two of us should be the guards.”

“I couldn’t agree more.”

Flint glanced over his shoulder. When our eyes met, my heart rate increased. How could he do that to me with just one look?

Jacinda nudged me after Flint turned around. “Is your pulse racing from the hike or something else?”

I glared at her.

The trees parted when we emerged near the cliff. The orange tether that Father had resurrected circled about ten feet from the cliff’s edge.

Di surveyed the rocky terrain. “Somewhere around here would be good.”

I pointed at a big pile of rocks. They were a few feet from the rope. “On top of there would work.”

Flint sprinted to the pile. He reappeared beside it.

My breath stopped at the sight he made standing near the cliff’s edge bathed in sunshine. His chestnut hair whipped around his head, and his tall, strong physique looked so powerful. I swallowed. Sometimes his beauty and my traitorous body’s reaction to him took me completely by surprise.

Flint glanced at his watch. “We’ve got a few minutes until we reach the thirty-minute mark. How should we play this?”

I forced myself to stop staring.

Jacinda put her hand on her hip. “Lena and I were thinking we should be the guards since you and Di are the fastest runners.”

Di’s short, dark hair swayed when she nodded. “That’s a good idea. I had a fraction of a vision on the walk here. It was of me and Flint near the red flag. I think we’re going to win.”

Flint glanced at his watch again. “Right, time’s up. Ready?”

Di nodded curtly. “Let’s go.”

They took off at a jog and disappeared into the trees, their tall frames and olive skin disappearing from view. I sighed. It was probably best it wasn’t me and Flint guarding the flag. I’d probably stare at him all day, admiring his pristine perfection, possibly drooling. He’d likely wonder if I’d bumped my head on a tree during the walk in.

Jacinda sat down daintily on the cliff and crossed her legs beneath her. “Are you going to breathe now that he’s gone?”

I hadn’t realized I’d been holding my breath until she said something. Letting it out in a rush, I plopped down beside her. My long hair flew around my face. I pulled the hair tie off my wrist and swirled my curls into a pile on the top of my head. “Is it that obvious?”

She smiled and patted my hand. “Only to me.”

“He doesn’t know I exist,” I said glumly.

“Of course he does. Besides Di, you mean more to him than anyone.”

I rolled my eyes. “I highly doubt that.”

Jacinda and I sat in the sunshine, talking to one another for I don’t know how long. The pure joy of being outside on a warm summer day, bantering with my sister, soon made my longing for what could never be disappear.

Just as I was about to say something else, a flash of color caught my attention.

“Hey, did you see that?” I scrambled to my feet and pulled Jacinda up with me. “I think I saw someone running over there.” I pointed to a space in the trees about fifty yards away.

“You did?” She shaded her eyes against the sun. “Do you think it was one of the twins?”

“It could have been. I thought he, or she, was wearing blue.”

“Jasper was wearing a blue shirt.”

Just then, one of the twins emerged from the tree line, about fifty yards down from us. I switched my vision. The yellow billowy cloud swayed like a haze in the sunlight. “It’s Jasper.”

“Has he spotted us?”

“Not yet. Quick, let’s get out of sight and see what he does.” I pulled her down.

We sank behind the rock pile while still on the balls of our feet. Adrenaline coursed through me. I’d almost forgotten we were playing a game.

I peeked around the rock pile and watched him. “Do you think he’s alone?”

Jacinda frowned. “Hold on. Be quiet and I’ll find out.”

She closed her eyes. I knew she’d turned her hearing on full power. Father had worked with her for years to hone and control it. She’d mastered her ability better than any of us. However, she didn’t have additional powers, not like Di, Mica and the twins.

Jacinda had described her hearing to me once. If she wasn’t able to turn it on and off, she’d have gone crazy. Voices, sounds, whispers, the wind—everything filtered through her senses at an aggravating level. The only thing she could compare it to was what she’d read about schizophrenia—the constant bombardment of noises and voices, unable to be controlled. No wonder Father had spent so much time with her when we were younger. She inevitably *would* have gone mad if she couldn’t control it.

“Jet’s here too. They’re ten yards away,” she whispered so quietly I almost didn’t hear.

A few seconds later, one of the twins said, “What’s that over there?”

“Their flag!” The other whooped. Quickening footsteps sounded.

I almost jumped up but waited for Jacinda’s signal that they were close enough.

Her eyes flashed open. “Now!”

We both jumped up. The twins were only a few yards away, running straight for us. The expression on their faces was priceless.

“Get Jet!” Jacinda yelled.

We grabbed for the twins as Jasper reached for the flag. Jacinda grabbed his wrist just in time, but I wasn’t quite as fast. Jet stopped dead in

his tracks and backpedaled. Before I could tag him, he turned and ran back to the trees.

“Dammit!” I followed him into the forest.

I fell behind as he quickly gained ground. I willed myself to move faster, using my small frame to its advantage. When Jet had to duck under hanging leaves and zigzag to avoid low lying branches, I kept running straight, leaves and branches brushing the top of my head. I was amazed that I slowly gained on him. My lungs burned, but I didn’t stop. I wouldn’t let him beat me this time!

Jet yelled when a branch scraped his face. He dared a look behind him. His eyes widened when he saw how close I was.

I grinned when he turned back around and watched in surprise as he tripped over a log. I lunged, pushing with all of my strength and launched myself into the air. “Got you!”

I’d never actually tackled someone before, at least not from an airborne maneuver and questioned if I’d made a smart move. It all happened so fast. One second, I was still running, the next, I was colliding into Jet’s muscular shoulders.

“Oomph!” The wind got knocked out of me. I could barely breathe, but I held onto him for dear life. I wrapped my legs around his middle and practically strangled his neck. He landed face first on the forest floor and groaned.

“I got you!” I yelled in gleeful surprise when I was finally able to breathe again.

Jet chuckled. “Is that what you call it?”

With a strong push, he rolled over unexpectedly and pinned me beneath him. My eyes widened when I realized how intimate our position was. I still had my legs wrapped around his waist, and my arms wound around his neck.

Of course, that was how everyone found us.

The red flag hung limply in Flint’s hand as he stared down at us, his face expressionless. Mica and Jasper burst out laughing, while Di merely cocked an eyebrow. Meanwhile, Jacinda seemed to be smothering a laugh while Amber had that yearning look in her eyes again.

“What the hell are you two doing?” Flint seethed. His chest rose and fell much faster than I’d ever seen. It couldn’t be from running. He never got winded. Not even when he sprinted up a mountain.

“I . . . ah . . .” I stammered. I pushed a leaf out of my eyes and tried to scramble out from under Jet but he was too heavy. “I . . . tackled him.”

“Yeah, she tackled me all right.” Jet gripped my hips and leered. “We were just getting to know one another on a whole new level.”

Mica and Jasper were about to fall over, they were laughing so hard.

I glared at Jet. His hands were glued to my hips. I struggled to get out from under him but he didn’t budge.

“I see,” Flint replied. He dropped the flag, turned and walked away. His movements were stiff, his hands clenched.

I slugged Jet in the shoulder, but he still didn’t move. Flint was getting farther away. I almost groaned. I needed to explain to him that he had it wrong. I didn’t want Jet. Not like that.

“Jet!” I exclaimed, my irritation growing. I frantically searched for Flint as a strange sensation grew in the air. It felt almost like . . . electricity. “Get off me!”

Flint had almost disappeared in the trees. Soon, I’d lose him in the forest and then I’d never find him and explain that I didn’t want Jet—at all.

I slugged Jet again. He didn’t move. That strange feeling in the air grew.

Jet grinned. “I like feisty redheads.”

Flint’s bright shirt was now a speck in the woods. Another minute and he’d be gone. Desperation bubbled up inside of me. “I said GET OFF ME!”

Jet’s body flew from mine.

He shot into the air as if an invisible hand had reached down and ripped him from my body. He collided with a tree about fifteen feet away.

My mouth dropped as commotion broke out.

“What the hell was that?” Mica exclaimed.

Jasper rushed to Jet’s side. Amber and Jacinda stared wide-eyed. Di called for Flint.

In a flash, Flint returned.

“What happened?” he said.

Di frowned, her gaze swinging between me and Jet. “I don’t know. Lena seemed to get agitated that Jet wouldn’t get off her and the next moment, he flew into that tree.”

Flint’s hair was mussed as if he’d been raking his hand through it. His dark eyes met mine.

My heart pounded. I wasn't sure if it was from Flint's look, that strange feeling that had been in the air or Jet shooting off me. I scrambled to my feet.

"I . . . ah . . ."

Di put her hands on her hips, an excited gleam in her eyes. "Did you do that, Lena?"

Jet was now standing. He picked leaves from his dark curly hair. A goose egg had formed on his temple.

My eyes widened. Father wouldn't be happy. He was always concerned about one of us getting seriously injured. Out here, driving down to the local ER wasn't an option.

"Lena?" Di said again. Both she and Flint watched me.

"I don't know."

I knew Di, Mica and the twins had learned in the last two years that they could do more with their abilities. So far, the rest of us couldn't. My hands shook when I looked down at them.

In a flash, Flint was at my side. "Are you okay?"

My whole body shook. "Did I *really* do that?"

"I don't know, but if you did, that was impressive."

"I didn't want Jet on me . . . I kept trying to get out from under him . . . I . . ." The words stumbled out of me before I had the sense to stop talking. There was no non-embarrassing way to explain to Flint that I didn't want Jet on me because of *him*. "I mean . . . I . . ."

Sighing, I clasped my hands.

A new light grew in Flint's eyes. "Just as long as you're okay."

"I'm fine." I glanced at the twin. "What about him?"

Jet's bright blue eyes looked dazed.

Flint shrugged. "He'll live. Serves him right for pinning you down if you tried to get out from under him."

I smothered a laugh.

Flint smiled.

My heart stopped as I gazed up at him. *Why does he have to be so good looking?*

"We better head back," Di said. Both she and Jasper flanked Jet's side. "Father will want to look Jet over, and we need to tell him what Lena did."

What I did? Did I really do that?

Flint pulled out his compass. "Follow me."

CHAPTER EIGHT

17 years old

The moon was high in the sky, the forest completely black. It was the night of the lunar eclipse. Father said we couldn't go out at night, but I didn't want to miss it. Of course, Mica and the twins had been game when I'd asked them to sneak out with me. Flint hadn't.

The air outside was crisp and cold. Winter was definitely on its way. Already, my fingertips were cold.

"Have you got the flashlights?" Jasper whispered to Mica. Even in the dark, cloudy puffs from his breath were visible.

"Flashlights?" she retorted. "We don't need flashlights. I can see in the dark!"

"Yeah, *you* can, but we can't." Jet fished two lights out of his pocket and handed me one. "Good thing one of us came prepared."

I took the flashlight from him but kept it off. "Better wait till we're in the woods, in case the light wakes anyone."

Mica pulled out her compass and got our bearings. Compasses usually worked in the forest but not always. Luckily tonight, it did.

I switched my vision. The twins and Mica's clouds appeared. I practiced my new skill as Mica led the way. It was hard. Pulling everyone's clouds into one cloud usually gave me a headache. Despite practicing daily with Father's help, I hadn't been able to replicate the sheer power I'd conjured at the beginning of summer when we'd played Capture the Flag.

Still, I tried.

It wasn't long before dark trees surrounded us. When a pounding headache began at the base of my skull, I stopped trying to manipulate the clouds. My skills weren't working very well tonight.

After a while, Mica stopped. She peered intently at the compass. "The cliff top should be this way." She pointed.

A sharp crack sounded to our left. I shifted my vision again. An orange cloud appeared. I couldn't stop my grin. Flint was trying to hide behind a tree about five yards away, but his billowing orange cloud gave him away.

"Flint!" I tried to keep the happiness from my voice, but Jet still snickered.

Flint stepped out from behind a thick tree trunk. He only wore a light fleece. Jet, of course, shone his light right at Flint's face.

"What are you doing out here?" Jasper asked.

Flint cleared his throat and stuffed his hands in his pockets.

I smiled brightly. "Did you change your mind about seeing the eclipse?"

He shrugged. "Something like that." His voice was steely, cool and sent shivers down my spine.

I continued smiling, like an absolute idiot.

"Are we gonna get going?" Mica asked, her tone irritated. "If we don't get moving, we're gonna miss the beginning."

Flint fell into step beside me as we resumed walking. Every now and then, his scent drifted my way. Spice, wood and tangerines. I leaned a little closer to him.

"Almost there," Mica said.

A few steps later, the trees parted and the rocky cliff appeared. At its ledge, it plummeted hundreds of feet. The expanse of the entire forest shone from this high up. It was one of my favorite places since it was one of the areas where we were able to get out in the open.

"Grab a seat." Jasper rubbed his hands together. "It should start soon."

Jasper, Mica and Jet walked to the edge and sat, their feet dangling in the air. Flint still stood by the tree line.

I shuffled my feet. "Um, where do you want to sit?"

When he glanced at me, I swear my heart stopped beating. His eyes were dark in the night. "Should we go to our usual spot?"

"Yeah, sure." I swallowed the nerves that bubbled up in me and followed him.

We stayed well away from the ledge. Walking behind him, I admired his broad shoulders and lean build. I almost tripped since I wasn't watching where I was going. Luckily, I caught myself before I fell.

"Are you okay?" He glanced over his shoulder.

"Yeah." I berated myself internally.

Flint stopped when we reached a large rock that jutted up from the cliff. It was the perfect height to hop onto, rather comfortable for sitting and was well away from the cliff's edge. All criteria that made Flint happy. He jumped easily onto it, but I had to back up to the rock and use my triceps to wiggle up.

"Do you need some help?" I heard the smile in his voice.

I gritted my teeth and shimmied back. "No, I'm fine."

Once I was seated, we both leaned back on our elbows. The rock was ridiculously cold through my jeans.

"Are you warm enough?" he asked.

As usual, he seemed to know exactly what I was thinking. "Yeah, I'm good."

We tilted our chins up and watched the moon. In no time, the eclipse started. The moon turned to an orange hue as the earth moved steadily between it and the sun.

"Here we go!" Jet called.

Jasper laughed, and Mica made some comment I couldn't hear. It was followed by another laugh from one of the twins.

I cleared my throat and tried to watch the moon but was acutely aware of how close my and Flint's thighs were. One little nudge to my right and we'd be touching. My gaze dipped to our elbows. Only inches separated us. As sneakily as I could, I glanced at Flint.

His dark profile appeared chiseled in the night. He seemed completely oblivious to me, his gaze fixed on the moon. But then a corner of his mouth tugged up.

I snapped my gaze away from him.

"Are you sure you're okay?" He didn't look at me, but I again heard a smile in his voice.

A blush furiously stained my cheeks. "Yep!"

The eclipse lasted a few hours. I didn't look at Flint again. He seemed perfectly relaxed and content to stay silent.

Each minute for me, however, was agony and rapture entwined into one. I loved that I was able to share this magical experience with him, but at the same time wished we enjoyed it as a couple, his arm around my shoulders or me leaning against his side. Instead, two inches separated us all night.

Two inches had never felt so big.

On the way back, everyone hiked quietly. I think the late night was catching up with all of us. It would be dawn soon, and we'd have to get up at the same time as everyone else to avoid Father's suspicion. My eyes were heavy as I followed Mica. When we returned to the cabin, I could barely keep them open.

"You look tired," Flint whispered when we crept inside.

I raised my eyebrows. *What does that mean? Tired as in, I look bad? Or tired, as in he feels sorry for me?* I wasn't sure I liked either option.

"I'm fine," I replied haughtily.

He chuckled.

"Quiet you two!" Mica hissed.

We stood in the entryway. Sounds were known for carrying from this area. I gave Flint another subtle glance.

Jet and Jasper elbowed one another. I eyed them suspiciously. They snickered a few times at Flint and me. Jet winked knowingly when our gazes met.

My eyes widened, and I dropped to unlace my boots.

Flint cleared his throat. I peeked up just in time to see him eyeing the twins sternly. Jet and Jasper stopped snickering and took their jackets off.

My eyes dropped back down.

My breath caught.

I suddenly couldn't breathe.

If Flint had the awareness to make Jet and Jasper stop making fun of me, then he obviously knew how I felt. *Oh crap!* I hastily stood, kept my eyes down and mumbled a goodnight before darting for the ladder. My stomach sank the whole way.

I was halfway upstairs when hands closed around my waist. If a hand hadn't clamped over my mouth, I would have shrieked.

"Quiet," Flint whispered in my ear. He pulled me off the ladder and in a blur of movement we were in the basement at the entrance to Father's lab.

"What the . . ." I managed at the light speed departure. A roll of nausea swept through me.

Flint frowned. "Are you okay?"

The nausea slowly passed. "Yeah."

I waited for him to explain.

"I told the others I was going outside to check something, but instead moved toward you. I did it at my speed so no one would see."

When Flint moved at his speed, he was a blur. “Why did you bring me down here?”

His eyes softened.

Is that pity in his gaze? My stomach lurched, and it had nothing to do with my previous nausea. I quickly glanced away, remembering the knowing expressions on the twins’ faces and the stern responding looks from Flint.

He’s here to set the record straight. He’s going to let me down easily without everyone listening.

It wasn’t the first time relationships had gone bad in our group. Jet had messed around with both Jacinda and Amber. Jacinda had been the one to break it off with him, but Amber had cried for days after Jet dumped her. Now, Flint was doing the same to me. The most humiliating part, however, was that Flint was doing it *before* we’d done anything.

We’d never been anything but friends.

“You don’t need to say anything.” My voice sounded almost robotic. “I better get to bed.”

His hand shot out when I tried to pass. “Lena, stop.”

Something in his voice made me pause.

He raked a hand harshly through his hair. “I just . . . I wanted to . . .” He wouldn’t meet my gaze.

With each moment, my heart sank more. I knew what was coming. I knew what he was going to say.

He took a deep breath. “I know how you feel about me.”

My stomach plummeted.

There it was.

The harsh truth.

“Oh.” Tears stung my eyes. He *had* brought me down here to save me from embarrassment. “Yeah, well . . .” I didn’t know what else to say. There was no point in denying it. Apparently, it was obvious to everyone. *How humiliating!*

“Lena, please don’t cry.” He stepped closer.

Flint seeing me cry only made it worse. I never cried. I could probably count on one hand how many times I’d cried in my life, but this . . . I wanted it too much. I wanted *him* too much. He was breaking my heart, and he knew it.

“I’m fine,” I whispered as another tear streaked down my cheek. “Really, I am.” I faked a smile through the tears.

He abruptly pulled me to him, crushing me against his chest. “It’s just that . . . Lena . . . you’re so young, and—”

“I know. I know!” I pushed him. “Really, you don’t need to say anything else.” I tried to pull back so I could run away, but he wouldn’t let me.

“No, I do. Please don’t push me away.”

I stopped fighting, but the tears kept coming. I bit my lip hard to keep from making a sound. For a few moments, he didn’t say anything. He ran his hands up and down my back. I tried not to notice how hard his arms felt or how wonderful he smelled. *How long have I wanted him to hold me?* Yet he held me now for an entirely different reason than what I’d always dreamed of.

“Lena . . .” he said in a strange, aching voice. “I don’t want to hurt you, but you’re only seventeen, and I’m a legal adult—”

“I know, Flint.” I cut him off. “You don’t need to explain. I get it.”

“I don’t think you do. You’re so young and—”

“I know!” I gave him a hard shove. This time he let me go.

“And that’s *why* I don’t want to push you into a relationship,” he said quietly.

I was so intent on getting away that it took me a moment to understand. “What did you say?” I whispered.

He sighed harshly. “You’re only seventeen. I’m twenty, soon to be twenty-one. I know that’s not a huge difference, but I’m an adult. You’re not. It’s not right to force you into an adult relationship when you’re so young.”

My mouth dropped. “Wait . . . what?”

His gaze softened.

I stared at him. I still wasn’t sure I’d heard him right.

“I know I shouldn’t want you. You’re still young enough you could change your mind and decide you want one of the twins, or maybe someday we’ll leave here and you’ll want someone completely different.” He raked a hand through his hair. “I’ve been trying to not want you, but . . . I do.”

I wiped the tears from my cheeks as best I could. *Is this really happening?* I stared at him. It’s all I could manage.

He smiled awkwardly and tenderly fingered the curls that had fallen in my gaze. He pushed them behind my ear.

And in his dark eyes, I saw it. All of the emotion. All of the love. All of the pent up longing. Everything I'd felt for as long as I could remember shone back at me.

"I've loved you for a long time."

I had to be dreaming. There was no way this was real. "You love me?" I whispered.

"Yes."

My breath came out in a rush as tears stung my eyes again for an entirely new reason. "I love you too," I whispered. "For as long as I can remember."

He smiled and cupped my cheek. It was hot against my cool skin. "I know, but that still doesn't change our ages or the fact that you're a minor and I'm not."

"I don't care."

"You should."

"I don't and I won't."

He chuckled and shook his head. "Always so stubborn."

I licked my lips.

His gaze drifted down. His irises darkened.

I licked my lips again. A tingly sensation grew deep inside of me, making me want to squirm. I edged closer to him, tentatively. I glanced up and laid a palm on his chest.

His breath sucked in, and before I could blink, he pulled me tightly to him as his lips molded over mine.

I clung tightly to him. Heat exploded within me. Never mind that it was my first kiss. Never mind that I had no idea what I was doing. Never mind that anybody could walk down the stairwell and find us. I was so over the moon by what he'd said that all self-consciousness vanished.

I entwined my fingers in his hair, his beautiful chestnut locks. They were as soft and thick as I'd always imagined they'd be. His hard chest pressed against my softer one. He lifted me off the floor and pushed me against the wall. I wrapped my legs tightly around him.

At first, the kiss was a little awkward. Our teeth hit a few times, and I bit him once, but then it changed. He didn't push his mouth against mine

quite so tightly and then his mouth opened. His tongue ran along my lips, questioning.

I opened my mouth in response.

His tongue brushed against mine.

My heart pounded as we found a rhythm and slowly got the hang of kissing and tasting one another. Then, our hands began moving. His darted under my shirt. Mine ran down his thighs. It felt as though months and years of longing went into everything. *Finally! Finally!* It was the only thought my brain clearly registered. *Finally*, he was mine.

When he pulled back, we were both breathless. The unforgiving, concrete wall pushed into my back but I didn't care. Instead, I felt . . . happy. I grinned, at which he smiled and then chuckled. He pulled me gently back to him and leaned down until our foreheads touched and our breaths intermingled.

"You have no idea how long I've wanted to do that," he said quietly.

"Probably not as long as I've wanted to."

He chuckled again, and in one of his lightning fast movements, swung me up into his arms. In the next instant, we were on the top floor, in the hallway outside of the bedrooms. My eyes widened when I looked at the ladder behind us. "How did you do that?"

"I jumped."

I almost giggled but stopped just in time. The hallway was already lighting up with morning sun. I knew everyone would be up soon.

"We better get back to bed," he whispered.

He carried me to my room and opened the door quietly. It appeared everyone was asleep, including Mica. Tiptoeing across the room, he lifted me and set me gently in my bunk.

"Night," he whispered. He kissed me softly and then was gone.

I leaned back on my bed, fingering my lips. *Is this real? Did all of that really happen?*

Someone delicately cleared her throat.

I glanced down.

Jacinda's eyes were open. She eyed me knowingly, but instead of saying anything smart, she stared at me, a content smile on her face.

Falling back against my pillow, I let the happiness and love I felt for Flint swim around inside of me. It shone as brightly within me as the rising sun.

CHAPTER NINE

18 years old

“Lena!” Flint whispered.

I bolted upright in bed. The room was dark, the cabin silent. I wasn’t sure if the voice I’d heard was real or a dream. I checked the clock by my bed. 3:07 am. Rubbing my eyes, I looked around. All of the girls were asleep, the room as quiet as death.

I was about to lay back down when Flint’s face appeared at my side. I almost screamed. Almost.

He grinned.

Muffling a laugh, I softly slugged him in the shoulder.

“Don’t do that!” I hissed, but I couldn’t keep the excitement from my voice. I loved when he surprised me at night, and lately, he was doing it more and more.

“Come on, babe. Full moon tonight.”

He swept the covers off of me and pulled me into his arms. The shirt I wore rode up my side as I slid down his body. His warm fingers easily encircled my waist. I shivered.

“Cold?”

I shook my head.

He smiled deeper, knowingly.

It was the third time this week he’d woken me to go outside. And despite the toll it took on my rest, I was excited every time he did. It was the only time we had privacy.

He lifted me into his arms, and we glided silently out of the room. Once at the back door, he put me down and handed me the pants and sweater he’d managed to grab on our way out. I threw them on. It wouldn’t be that cold. It was early spring.

“Do you think anyone knows we sneak out?” I asked.

He frowned and closed the door quietly behind us. “Hard to say. Conroy’s not exactly the oblivious type. You’d think he’d know after raising eight teenagers that things like this are bound to happen, whether he likes it or not.”

“But he never says anything.”

“Well, we’re not kids anymore.”

Flint pulled a GPS out of his pocket. I knew where we were going. It was the same place we went every time we sneaked out.

If it weren’t for these crazy, disorienting Hills, Flint would have picked me up and carried me at his speed. Then, we’d be there in no time, but since that wasn’t an option, I huffed by his side.

Flint studied the GPS intently. Despite it, we lost our way. We knew we were lost since the area looked unfamiliar.

“Let’s try and backtrack,” I said.

Luckily, some time later, we crested a familiar hill. I huffed out of breath while Flint, as usual, seemed immune to the steep landscape.

In the bright moonlight, the mouth to our cave appeared. It was a large, black hole. Smiling, Flint put the GPS away and whisked me up into his arms. A second later, he set me down at the cave’s entrance. He’d moved carefully. Only a slight bout of nausea rolled through me.

Our cave wasn’t overly deep, maybe twenty feet from mouth to back. When we’d first discovered it several summers ago, at that time we’d only been friends, there’d been littered animal remains and scattered rocks and leaves everywhere. It took some work, but we’d cleaned it up. Our human scent lingered when we left and helped keep critters from occupying the space.

Now, it was where we went to be alone.

Flint pulled out matches and lit the lantern we kept on one of the large rocks. From there, he moved to the candles before hunkering down to light the fire.

In the back, we had a few old blankets and pillows. I hauled out the bedding and arranged it while Flint pulled out another match. By the time we were done, a fire crackled and we had a cozy place to lie together and talk.

Flint pulled me down on a blanket and plumped a pillow for me. “I have something for you.”

I turned in his arms to face him. “You do?”

He smiled and pulled a box from his pocket before handing it to me. It was smooth and tied with a simple ribbon. “Happy birthday.”

“You remembered!” I smiled.

He chuckled. “Of course, I remembered.”

I opened the gift carefully, loving the smooth paper and satiny ribbon. He’d obviously spent time wrapping it. Inside was a small velvet box. My breath caught.

Flint’s eyes were dark. His expression was impossible to read, but he watched my every move.

Very slowly, I opened the lid. I gasped. A beautiful chain link bracelet with a heart shaped charm attached to it glinted in the firelight. I picked it up. Holding the charm up to the fire, I turned it over. There was an inscription.

Love you Forever.

My mouth opened then closed then opened. “Flint . . . how . . .”

He’d never given me anything like this. Usually, we made gifts for one another, with whatever items we could scrounge up in the wild or re-use from what we had in the cabin.

“I found it online at a jewelry store. I asked Conroy to buy it on the last supply trip he took. It seemed the least I could do on your eighteenth birthday.”

Tears pricked my eyes. I leaned up and kissed him on the mouth, pulling him tightly to me.

“I love it,” I whispered.

“Do you really?”

I smiled at the uncertainty in his voice. “Yes, I do. Help me put it on.”

He undid the clasp and looped it around my wrist. It fit perfectly, not too big, not too small. The small charm hung prettily from the chain. “It’s perfect.”

Flint pulled me closer, a satisfied smile on his face.

I wrapped my arms around his neck and lifted my lips to his. The taste and smell of him made fire grow in my belly, licking and singeing my insides. I felt his need grow. As was becoming more prominent every day, the energy around him grew the deeper we kissed and the more we touched. My abilities had improved over the winter. I was getting better at feeling energy in everyone’s clouds. The feel of our energy surrounding us was intoxicating, like a heavy sphere that pulsed and grew with our desire.

Our movements quickly became frantic. Clothes were ripped off until we were naked and touched skin to skin. The fire crackled beside us. Its warmth, along with the searing heat coming from Flint, took any chill out of my exposed limbs.

"I want you so much," he whispered in between kissing my neck and trailing hands down my back.

"Make me yours."

He pulled back, his eyes dark. "Do you mean that?"

"Yes."

Flint reached for his jeans and fished something from the pocket. A condom.

My eyes widened. "Where did you get that?"

"Conroy."

A jumble of emotions fluttered through my stomach. Father's rule was no sex until eighteen. He only provided birth control when we reached adulthood.

Now, I was eighteen.

"Are you sure?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm sure. Very sure."

He smiled and leaned down.

AFTERWARD, WE LAY together quietly by the fire. Shiny sweat glistened on our skin. I bunched the blanket around my chest and under my arms.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Flint asked.

I bit back a smile. He'd already asked me that a dozen times. "Yes, I'm fine."

"I didn't hurt you?"

"Not really." It had hurt a little at first, but then it faded and all I'd wanted was him.

Flint's frown deepened.

I giggled. His worry could be so endearing at times. "Trust me, I've never been happier. I'm so happy I feel like I could burst."

The anxiety lining his face eased. He grunted and lay back down, pulling me closely to him.

His naked skin pressed against me under the blanket. His entire body was so hard. I held the bracelet up, watching the metal catch the light. *Love*

you Forever. I bit my lip to keep emotions from overwhelming me.

“Do you think we’ll ever be able to marry?” I swallowed. I hadn’t meant to ask that out loud.

Instead of looking shocked, Flint leaned up on his elbow. “Is getting married something you want?”

I shrugged and did my best to meet his gaze. “I dunno. To be honest, I’m not sure it had be possible if we die out here. Laws have no meaning in our world.”

Flint frowned. “No, we may not have U.S. laws in our lives, but what is marriage really? Just two people deciding to bind themselves for life, declaring their commitment in front of witnesses. I don’t see why we couldn’t do that up here. It would have the same meaning minus the official paperwork.”

My heart thudded. I swallowed before replying, “So . . . that *is* something you want?”

“I thought that’d be obvious.”

“You mean you’ve actually thought about marrying me? Even though we’ve only been together six months?”

He shrugged. “Not officially marry I suppose, but stay together? Yes.” His voice dropped lower. “You’re it for me, Lena. There’s no one else I could ever want. My whole life it’s always been you. I couldn’t imagine it any other way. I chose that inscription for a reason.” He fingered the charm. “I’ll love you forever, you and only you.”

My stomach flipped. Flint had told me many times that he loved me but never quite like that. Never so definite. “You’re the only one I could ever love too. I could never be with anyone else.”

He pulled me to him, and his lips found mine.

CHAPTER TEN

19 years old

Flint and I sat on the porch, the summertime sun shining down. He leaned closer to me. “Try harder, babe. You can do this.”

Switching my vision, Flint’s cloud appeared. The single orange color danced around his shoulders, but that was it. Nothing else.

“Keep trying . . . tell me when you see them.” His voice sounded distant even though he sat right beside me.

I concentrated harder, willing my vision to expand, to see more.

Sweat popped on my brow after a few minutes. A trickle slid past my ear.

“Keep trying . . .” He sounded yards away now.

Slowly, they came into focus.

Clouds appeared around all of the plants and animals, like fuzzy white cotton balls. “I can see them!”

I’d only recently been able to master the skill of seeing plant and animal clouds. Father had been working with me for the last two years on my more elusive abilities.

Concentrating, I tried to pull the clouds together from the small creatures and trees within the forest, but it was too much. The power was too great. Shifting my vision to the side, I focused on the small clouds around a patch of wildflowers. Carefully, I lifted that aura and joined it with the cloud from a single sapling.

Together, the wildflowers and sapling auras formed a small ball of energy. Sweat beaded along my upper lip as I carefully maneuvered the ball. Bringing it behind the rock that sat on the porch beside Flint and me, I pushed the energy ball into the rock with everything I had.

The rock skittered from the porch into the yard.

My breath rushed out of me. I snapped my vision back to normal. The clouds disappeared. “I did it!”

Flint grinned. “I knew you could do it. We should get something bigger, or see if you can—” His voice stopped when the screen door banged behind us.

Amber stepped onto the porch. “Do you smell that?”

“Smell what?” The glow from my victory still flowed through me. I practically bounced in excitement.

Amber jogged down the steps. She closed her eyes and inched toward the trees. A second later, her eyes flashed open. “The forest is on fire.”

My eyes widened. All thoughts of working on my energy balls disappeared. *“What?”*

Her brow furrowed. “I thought I smelled something this morning but wasn’t sure, but it’s grown stronger.”

Flint and I pushed to standing.

I put my hands on my hips. “What do you mean you smelled something but didn’t say anything?”

She shrugged guiltily, her large doe eyes wide. “I didn’t think anything of it.”

I softened my tone. “Amber . . . fires are serious. Where do you think it is?”

She nodded in the direction she’d been walking. “That way, but the wind changes sometimes, so it comes and goes. It’s still far away. Sorry, I should have said something.”

I gave her a reassuring squeeze. “It’s okay. Now we know.”

Flint’s expression conveyed nothing, but I was so in tune with him, I noticed the slightest tightening of his jaw. “Where exactly do you think it is?”

“That way.” Amber pointed.

In a flash, Flint leaped from the steps to the porch’s roof. Another jump and he was on top of the cabin. I scrambled out to the yard, trying to get a better view of him as he surveyed above the trees. “Do you see anything?”

Flint frowned, shielding his eyes from the sun. “It would help if Mica got up here, but I think I see a very faint haze on the horizon. If that’s smoke, then the forest is definitely on fire, but it’s still miles from us. We should still tell Conroy.”

I gulped. In the fifteen years we'd lived in the cabin, we'd managed to survive the forest fires that had broken out in Colorado, but I knew we weren't immune to them. It was our biggest vulnerability.

"I'll get Mica first." I dashed into the house and up the ladder.

Mica lay on her bottom bunk, legs bent. A half-read book sat propped in front of her. She glanced up when I walked into our room and did a double take when she saw my expression. "Everything okay?"

"Amber thinks there's a fire, and Flint's on the roof. He wants you to come up and tell him what you see."

She dropped her book and sprang out of bed. We raced outside. Jacinda and everyone else were already standing outside when we returned, probably alerted that something was up from my panicked race into the house. Only Di and Father were missing.

"Has anyone told Father?" I asked.

"I'll find him!" Amber rushed inside.

I hurried into the yard as Flint jumped back to the ground. He landed as gracefully as a cat, springing back up as if his joints were indestructible hinges.

He turned to Mica. "I need you on the roof. I'll have to jump you up there."

The grin on Mica's face said exactly how she felt about that.

Flint reached down and picked her up. "Hold on."

With a bend of his knees and a few quick jumps, the two of them stood on top of the cabin. Flint set Mica down and held onto her until she steadied.

"What do you see?" His voice carried down to us.

She turned toward the horizon, her gaze narrowing. Mica's sight had improved considerably in the past few years. While Father had worked with me on gathering clouds and controlling that energy, he had worked with Mica on changing her eyes to mimic others. He'd also helped her improve her vision to allow it to zoom in and out when needed. My guess was that she had switched her vision to its highest zoom. Sometimes, on a clear day, she could see small objects over a mile away.

"Definitely a fire," Mica said. "Looks to be burning over ten acres right now. It's still small."

"Do you think it's moving toward us or away from us?" I called.

Mica shrugged. “Hard to say. If Flint and I check again tomorrow, I’ll have a better idea.”

A few hops later, she and Flint were back on the ground. Mica’s cheeks flushed pink. Excitement danced in her eyes.

I glanced at Jasper. He was glowering at Flint. Smiling, I tossed an arm around Mica’s shoulders. “Can be jarring, can’t it?”

She grinned. “I think my head’s still spinning, but that was fun. I wouldn’t mind doing it again!”

THAT EVENING, EVERYONE was pacing or standing at the windows with furrowed brows. Father was particularly quiet. He kept checking his computer. The internet didn’t have much coverage on the fire. It was still too small, but rangers thought it began from some hikers who’d illegally started a camp fire. They were still looking for suspects and had asked the public for tips.

It got worse over the next few days.

Each day, the fire grew. Despite fire crew’s attempts to contain it, it was coming our way. Father barely slept. At night, I heard him pacing the halls. Several times, when I got up to use the bathroom, the light was on in his study. Twice, I’d caught the sound of him on his phone, something he rarely used out here. Even though it communicated with the cell-phone system via satellite, it could still be traced.

On the fifth day, Father sat us down at the kitchen table. Exhaustion shone in his eyes.

“We may have to evacuate.”

The fire had grown within ten miles of us. Heavy smoke was now something we smelled daily. My heart clenched every time I thought about losing our home. I had no idea where we would live. It didn’t seem returning to society was an option. Father drummed into us on a regular basis that his outside contacts continually confirmed that O’Brien Pharmaceuticals was *still* looking for us.

Father finished by saying, “If things don’t turn around by tomorrow, we’ll be leaving. I’ve arranged for the chopper to arrive at eleven tomorrow night. Half of you will go in the first run, the other half in the second. We’ll all be evacuated by midnight.”

“Where will we go?” I asked.

“To one of my homes in Montana.”

“But surely we can do something!” Di said. “To put out the fire?”

“Like what?” Jet said. “Huff and puff until we blow it out? How the hell can we stop a forest fire?”

“What about the chickens?” Anxiety laced Amber’s words. Our chickens, which lived in the barn behind the house, depended on us.

Father frowned. “I’m sorry, but we’ll have to leave them behind. We’ll turn them loose, but they’ll be on their own to escape the fire.”

A horrified squeak escaped her.

Jacinda put an arm around Amber’s shoulders, drawing her close.

“How long will we stay there?” I asked. “In Montana?”

“Until I can arrange a new location for us to live. I’m not sure how long that will take.”

A noisy murmur erupted around the table. Some of us appeared scared, others stunned. The twins, however, looked excited. Throughout it all, Flint sat as still as stone, his face expressionless.

I had no idea how long it took Father to build this cabin, furnish the laboratory, build the barn, and transfer all of the supplies and furniture that adorned our home, but I imagined it took a while. Months maybe or years. And as much as I wanted to venture somewhere else in the world and experience a new way of life, I didn’t want it this way. Not with our home destroyed, our way of life gone, never to return to again.

Hot tears pricked my eyes. No, not like this.

SUPPER THAT NIGHT was subdued. It was hard to look at our food supplies and not mourn how everything would be lost. Later, we all drifted off to sleep with scents of dinner and distant smoke in the air. It wasn’t until early in the morning that I woke to a tapping sound on the window. At first, I didn’t recognize it.

The tapping grew louder. I blinked my eyes open. It wasn’t until I sat up and looked around that I realized the others had done the same.

“Is that what I think it is?” Mica asked.

Jacinda turned on the light. The soft wattage bathed our room in gold. “It’s exactly what you think it is.” She grinned.

We all jumped out of bed and raced to the window. I grinned as the wind picked up and the rain fell faster. It beat against the window, soaking the pane and everything else it touched. Tiny rivers trailed down the

mountain when lightning flashed, illuminating the yard. I'd never been happier to see anything in my life.

"Do you think this will put out the fire?" Amber practically jumped with glee.

"It's hard to say," Di said, "but it'll definitely help."

Amber clapped. "So we won't have to leave the chickens behind!"

None of us could sleep after that.

We skipped down the hall to get Father, Flint and the twins. Father hooked up the computer to the modem which bounced signals to a satellite via the dish. It kept losing connection, as it always did in bad weather, but after many attempts, we all grinned when we saw the forecast.

Rain, rain and more rain.

AT THE END of the week, with the fire crews still working and nature helping, the fire was completely extinguished. A week after that, Flint and I ventured to our cave.

The charred forest could be seen in the distance, swathed in the moonlight as we sat at the entrance. I knew in a few years it would be green again. For now, I was thankful we still had our home. I leaned against his shoulder and enjoyed the fresh air once again.

Flint put his arm around me. "Do you wish we could have left? That Conroy would have been forced to move us somewhere new?"

I took a moment to respond. "No. I want to leave this place someday and actually live in the real world but not like that. It would break my heart if our home was destroyed."

He nodded although the slight tensing of his shoulders told me he wasn't entirely happy with my answer.

It was no secret, my desire to leave the cabin, to make my own life. Jacinda and Mica felt the same, as did the twins. Amber was quickly following suit. Di and Flint were the only ones content to stay in the secluded life Father had created.

I knew it wore on Father, how most of us wanted to leave. Father was still convinced it wasn't safe. He told us his outside contacts continually reported that O'Brien still had eyes all over the country—people paid to report if they ever spotted us.

But it didn't feel real. We'd never seen those men. We'd never experienced anyone pursuing us. I didn't want to consider that Father may

be making those sinister claims up, but I didn't know. Maybe he simply wanted us to live with him forever, and he used O'Brien as an excuse to keep us hidden.

The others had similar doubts about the gravity of our situation. Twice, the twins had left the cabin and hiked the two-day distance to Little Raven, the nearest town. The first time, they'd been gone for over a week. The second time, two weeks. Father had been worried sick the entire time, and despite his many attempts, he hadn't been able to find them.

However, Jet and Jasper both returned when the money they'd stolen from Father ran out. An excited light had shone in their eyes, though. Amber, Jacinda, Mica and I had listened eagerly to what they'd done.

Di and Flint hadn't.

Sometimes, I wondered if the twins would have returned if they had enough money to stay living on their own. The one time I'd asked Jet that, he'd shrugged, his face serious. "I'd miss you guys," was his only response.

I took heart in that. Come what may, we were a family, and family stuck together.

Flint made a disgruntled noise.

I peered up at him, but he seemed lost in thought. Laying my head back against his shoulder, I stared off into the distance. Within a hundred miles there were cities, movie theaters, neighborhoods, schools, businesses, shops. A real life lived by real people. It was all so close, yet so far away.

Maybe, just maybe, we could find a way to get there.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

20 years old

Father was spending a lot of time in the lab, more so than usual. Ever since the fire, he'd changed.

None of us knew what was bothering him. Flint thought he was simply shaken, that the close call was too concerning so Father immersed himself in work for distraction. The twins joked he was working for that place again, manufacturing new drugs to be used on children. Nobody found those jokes funny. Jacinda brushed it all off, saying we were overreacting.

As usual, Di kept her lips sealed about whatever she and Father were doing in the lab. Amber and I both tried to sneak down there on several occasions to see what they were up to but quickly discovered, in no uncertain terms, that we were not allowed in the lab for the next several months. The lab door was continually locked.

I groaned every time I thought about it. *What are they doing down there?*

Thanksgiving came and went and Mica turned twenty-one. In December, Flint turned twenty-four and Di turned twenty-three. We kept getting older. With our increasing ages came a restlessness that had been growing steadily in me for the past year. I was twenty years old yet I'd done nothing with my life. I still lived at home. I still lived hidden from society, and no end of any of it was in sight.

Some days it seemed the only way to change that was to take matters into my own hands. To do what the twins had done—leave the mountain and set out on my own.

My heart sank. But I could never leave Flint. It was why I'd never done it.

Despite Christmas, my favorite holiday looming, my restlessness hadn't abated. When I was younger, Christmas felt like a different world

and always made me happy. Father worked hard to transform our home into a festive abode, but this year, I just couldn't get into it. It didn't help that Di and Father were so distracted that they were late for our Christmas tree cutting.

"What are they *doing* down there?" I paced outside the basement door.

Flint merely grunted.

He sat on a chair, scooted under a small table by the window. The laptop lay open in front of him. An online tutor Father had set up could be heard through the audio. I had no idea what they were talking about. It sounded like a bunch of computer mumbo jumbo.

Flint's education had taken a more sinister turn during the past two years. Whereas Father worked with me on harnessing energy, he set up tutors to teach Flint, Di and Jasper about computer hacking, lock picking and other nefarious endeavors. As for *why* Father thought those skills may be needed only made me shudder.

I tried to tune out the tutor as I started pacing again. Sounds from outside permeated into the living room. The twins were sharpening the saw we would use to cut down the tree. Jacinda and Amber were gathering rope and the sled to pull the tree. Mica's laughter carried through the yard.

It was all so *normal*.

I wrung my hands as my frustration turned into something else. As much as I tried, I couldn't shake the feeling that something bad was coming.

Mica's heavy stomps sounded in the entryway. The porch door banged closed. A moment later, she appeared in the living room. She wore a thick sweater, jeans and still had her hat on. "Where are Di and Father? I thought we were getting the tree today?"

I joined her when she wandered into the kitchen. "I'm sure you can guess where Di and Father are."

"The lab?" She rolled her eyes. "Jeez, they're in there every day now. Without any breaks too. Weren't they down there until after midnight last night?"

"Yep."

She opened the fridge and took out some cold cuts and cheese that Father had brought back on his last supply run. Tossing her hat on the counter, she grabbed the bread. "I'm starving, want a sandwich?"

"No, I'm good." I made myself stop pacing and sit at the table.

“What do you think they’re doing down there?” Mica asked after taking a huge bite.

I sighed and cupped my chin in my hand. “I wish I knew. I wonder that every day.”

Mica frowned and looked out the window. Her eyes lit up. I followed her gaze. Jasper. Mica and Jasper had been together even longer than Flint and me.

We waited another hour in the kitchen before everyone began asking questions about when we’d go. Flint finally ventured into the basement to see what was holding up Father and Di. He returned a minute later, explaining they’d lost track of time and would be up shortly. By shortly, I guessed over two hours.

By the time we set out, it was late afternoon.

Di apologized several times for keeping us waiting while we trudged through the forest. However, Father’s mind never seemed to leave the lab. He looked deep in thought as we trekked through the Forbidden Hills, a heavy frown on his face.

Just before dark, we returned to the cabin.

We spent the evening pulling out ornaments, tinsel and stringing lights. I tried not to notice how both Di and Father kept inching toward the lab. By ten o’clock, they’d managed to disappear without anyone noticing.

Flint and I climbed up the ladder to get ready for bed while Mica, the twins and Amber stayed in the living room. Jacinda had retreated to the kitchen to warm up apple cider.

If I hadn’t been so worried about what Father and Di were doing, I would have stayed with everyone else. However, I wasn’t very good company at the moment. What normally was one of the best days of the year had left me with a churning stomach. Father had never left our Christmas tree decorating early before.

No matter what he’d had going on in the lab.

Flint and I walked into his room and closed the door. He pulled me on his bed, his small twin bed groaning in protest over the added weight. Pale moonlight bled onto the floor, leaving everything in dark shadows and silvery light.

He kissed me until my head spun. When he finally pulled back, it took me a moment to get my bearings.

“What are they doing down there?” I pushed up on an elbow. “Father’s never left the tree decorating early before. He’s usually the last to turn out the lights.”

“I know.” Flint’s voice was grim.

“Do you think something’s wrong? Maybe Father’s sick, or Di’s sick, and they’re trying to find a drug to cure it? Something like that?”

For a minute, he didn’t say anything, but he eventually shook his head. “I don’t think so. I’m pretty sure Di would have told me if she was sick.”

I swallowed. “So do you think Father’s sick?”

“That I couldn’t tell you.”

My stomach plummeted. I couldn’t imagine a life without Father. He’d always just . . . been there.

Flint’s arms tightened around me. The inevitable safe feeling he always evoked soon worked its magic. “No matter what happens, we’ll all be okay, and I’ll always be here to take care of you.”

I couldn’t stop my smile. “I don’t need you to take care of me. I’m pretty capable.”

Flint chuckled. “I know. But, maybe *I* need to take care of you, for my own peace of mind.”

“That I can live with.”

Flint fell asleep as we lay on his bed, our arms entwined. His heat warmed me, yet my worry continued. Something was wrong, very wrong.

I could feel it.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Present Day

The memories played through my mind, shifting back and forth. Everything was so vivid, so real. It wasn't until my eyes fluttered open, and I saw Flint hunkered down beside me, the rest of the group and Father behind him, that I realized they'd been just that.

Memories.

My childhood. My family. The cabin—our home. Flint. Always Flint.

My mouth parted as the enormity of what I'd remembered settled in. Flint and I had been in love for years. What I'd felt for him, all those months ago, on that first day we re-met in Pete's entry way *had* been real. Something buried deep in my subconscious, that could never be destroyed, had recognized him. Father was right. Not even his memory drug could break our bond.

I tried to sit up. Flint stopped me. "You need to lie still. Conroy and Di want to check you over one more time."

I relaxed back. Or tried to. A headache thrummed in the back of my mind. The more awake I became, the more it hurt.

Brushing it off, I stared in wonder at Flint. Dark eyes, that mirrored my surprise and awe, stared back.

"All of that was real? What we felt? What we experienced together?"

"It was," he said huskily.

Jacinda kneeled beside me, smiling. "How are you, sis?"

I grinned. Even though Father had told Jacinda and me that we were related, it hadn't felt real. It was like being told you'd won the lottery. It seemed too good to be true, but now I had all of my memories. Memories of Jacinda being the only one I confided in for years, the only one who understood how I felt about so many things. She truly was my sister.

I squeezed her hand. “You’ve always been my friend, not just my sister.”

“Ever since we were little.”

Father stepped forward and peered closely at my eyes, lifting my lids. Had I really been calling him Conroy for the past few days? I shook my head internally. He was my Father, not a stranger.

“Do you feel all right?” he asked.

The headache still throbbed at the base of my neck, but headaches were nothing new to me. I nodded. “Yeah, I feel fine.”

He gave me the okay to sit up, and I again marveled at how surreal this was. It felt weird, fully understanding now who Father was. The memories of the past few days were still in my mind. Meeting him, calling him Conroy, not knowing who he was. But then memories of my lifetime were there too. He’d been a father figure to me for as long as I could remember.

It was weird. Like I’d lived two separate lives, remembered both, and was only now understanding they were joined. All the love I had for Father was there again. I now knew why I’d felt the innate need to trust him when we’d reunited. He’d never hurt me, and he’d always been a father figure, even if we weren’t blood-related.

I swallowed the lump in my throat as the headache moved to the back of my eyes. “Hi, Father.”

He smiled, relief on his face. “Oh, my little, Galena. I really missed you.”

I got up and wrapped my arms around him.

His chin settled on the top of my head. I relished his smell. I remembered it now. Soap, aftershave, and mint. It felt so easy, so right to hug him like this. I’d been doing it my whole life.

I squeezed my eyes shut against the tears that wanted to spill. I glanced up at him. “Are you glad we’re all back?”

“As frightened as I am for what will happen now, I’ve missed you all terribly. My life during the past six months has felt very empty.”

I hugged him tighter. “Don’t do that again. No matter what happens, I want to remember you forever.”

“I won’t.”

I squeezed him one last time.

He sighed and rubbed his eyes. “We should all go to bed. It’s been a long day.”

I pulled back and for the first time since waking felt the tension in the room. For once, the twins didn't look so cocky or sure of themselves. They stood apart from one another, their hands in their pockets. Jasper stood by himself, beside the couch, his gaze on the floor. He'd obviously woken before me. Mica stood behind him, her eyes shooting daggers at his back, while Amber was curled in a ball on one of the armchairs.

I swallowed.

Right.

For years, Jasper and Mica had been together, but for the past few months, they'd been anything but a couple. Jasper had been with Amber. I couldn't imagine what Mica felt right now. Part of me wanted to hug her. Another part of me wondered if she wanted space or someone to rant at.

Before I could do anything, she uttered a disgusted sound and stalked from the room. Amber scampered up a moment later and disappeared in the opposite direction. A few sobs trailed in her wake.

Jasper hung his head. Even Jet seemed at loss for words.

Biting my lip, I entwined my hand through Flint's. I felt sick for Mica. If I'd woken up, knowing all I knew about Flint and me, and then realized for the past few months he'd actually been with someone else . . . It felt as if someone punched me in the gut just thinking about it.

"Is she going to be okay?" I asked.

Jacinda shrugged, her mouth down-turned. "Would you be if you were in her shoes?"

Di crossed her arms. "She'll find a way to deal with it. She doesn't have a choice. What's done is done."

As cruel, or perhaps as pragmatic as those words were, as always, Di was right. We couldn't change the past. Whatever Mica, Jasper and Amber decided to do from here would be up to them, but their actions couldn't be undone.

Father sighed heavily and shook his head. "We should turn in." His eyes were glassy, his expression haggard.

"What time is it?" I asked.

Flint squeezed my hand. "Ten at night."

"Wow." I'd been asleep for six hours. "So all of those months after the fire, when you two were locked in the basement, this drug is what you'd been working on? The drug to make us forget?" I still remembered that feeling of impending doom, that something bad was to come. I'd been right.

Father nodded. “And the drug to make you remember. I wanted both on hand.”

I glanced at Di. She stood by the cold fireplace, a brooding expression on her face. All along Father had planned to erase our memories, but . . .

“Did you know, Di? What it was for?”

She shook her head. “No. I only knew it affected memory, but I didn’t know it was going to be used on us.” Her tone was neither defensive nor cunning. I knew she told the truth.

“Let’s go to bed.” There was an edge in Flint’s voice. A dark expression clouded his face. “Lena?” He pulled me toward the stairs.

I followed him from the room. I glanced back when we reached the stairs to find Father watching us. His mouth was down-turned, his expression regretful. I knew now that he and Flint had never formed a close relationship. I also knew that was Flint’s choice. Not Father’s. Flint had always kept Father at arm’s length. He blamed Father for everything O’Brien had done to us when we were little. All of the drugs and experiments, even though Father did everything he could to minimize those experiences. Chewing my lip, I followed Flint down the staircase.

WHEN WE WERE alone in our room, Flint closed the door. He raked a hand harshly through his hair. The energy in the air abruptly changed. That raw, powerful feeling that always rolled off him when he was angry increased.

“What is it?” I asked.

Flint sighed heavily. He sat on the bed and clasped his hands together on his knees. The bed was still mussed from us sleeping in it. Tentatively, I sat beside him. The energy coming from him was so strong.

“It’s . . . him. Conroy.” Flint sneered, abruptly stood and paced a few times. “How could he have done this to us? Erased our memories, separated us? He took you away from me. On *purpose*. He had to know what you were to me, what you *are* to me, yet he did it anyway. That doesn’t sound like somebody who cares about us.” He stopped at the window and looked out. In a fierce voice, he said, “I’ll never forgive him.”

For a moment, I watched him. The broad shoulders, the chestnut hair, the pulsing anger that hid a core made of steel coated in loyalty. It was all so . . . *Flint.*

One of my earliest memories was of him and me outside at the cabin, right after Father took us from that place. The leaves were crimson and gold, the air crisp. At that age, Flint barely spoke. He often isolated himself from others. As the oldest, Flint had been more traumatized by O'Brien than any of us.

That day he'd stood apart from everyone else, staring at the trees, refusing to interact while everyone else played together. I'd approached him, not relenting until he smiled. It was a small smile but still a smile. My innocent cheerfulness and innate need to include everyone in everything had been the beginning of our bond. I knew now that our relationship was so strong because it was based on friendship. For years we'd only been childhood friends, both of us loyal to the other, watching out for and protecting each other. Yet Flint took loyalty to an entirely new level.

I knew he'd rather die than hurt me.

Pulling him back to the bed, I practically forced him to sit beside me. A twinge of anger bubbled up in me. Flint was right. Father had purposely split Flint and me up. But I also knew Father didn't enjoy doing that. He didn't want to. All he ever wanted was to protect us.

He felt he had no choice.

I shook my head. I was still trying to process it all. It was all so surreal.

The stress of trying to understand all that had happened made my headache grow. I rubbed the back of my neck. It still hadn't abated. If anything, the throbbing had grown.

"I don't know what to say," I finally replied. "I know what you mean, and I agree that Father had to know what he was doing to us."

"So you're mad too?"

I paused, frowning. "A little angry—yes. But, I'm not angry the way you are."

"You're not?"

I shook my head.

"How can you not be?"

Doing my best to ignore the throbbing in my skull, I tried to articulate how I felt. "Father has always loved us, I know that. And he's only ever wanted to protect us. That I'm certain of. Surely you can relate to that?"

Flint stared at me with disbelieving eyes.

I placed my hand over his. "If you thought something was going to harm me, and the only way to guarantee I'd stay safe was to leave me

forever, you'd leave, wouldn't you?"

He frowned, his expression grim. "I can't imagine anything being so significant that I'd have to leave to protect you. It seems to make more sense for me to *stay* to protect you."

"No, we can't imagine anything that significant, but Father can."

Flint's brow furrowed.

I rubbed my neck again. "I barely remember that place we came from when we were kids. It's all foggy. I only have one or two clear memories of it, but Father remembers all of it. And he knows more about those people than we ever will. Of all of us, Father knows what that group is capable of. I'm willing to give him the benefit of the doubt. I know he wanted to keep us together, but in the end, he knew the safest bet was to split us up. I truly don't believe he ever wanted to do that. He chose the lesser of two evils."

Flint raked a hand through his hair. His energy kicked up a notch. "So you're really not mad at him?"

I shook my head. "Not really."

He sighed.

I put my arm around his shoulders. They were so wide I could barely get my hand cupped around his deltoid. He turned and pulled me to him. He easily engulfed me in his embrace.

"I love you," he whispered. "No matter what we both think on this matter."

"I love you too."

"But I don't think I'll ever forgive him."

"I know." After a lifetime of blaming Father, what happened this year would only make it worse. Flint and Father would probably never see eye to eye.

"Yet you forgive him so easily."

"Yes."

He pulled me tighter to him. His hands roamed up and down my back. I peeked up at him. His eyes were distant, unseeing as if lost deep in thought.

I rubbed against him, trying to pull him from the mood he was falling into. It took a moment before he seemed aware of what I was doing.

His eyes darkened when he looked down. His voice grew husky. "Just what are you doing, babe?"

“Helping you remember a few things.” I rubbed against him more. If nothing else, this new distraction helped me ignore my pounding headache.

Hot energy rolled off him. “I think I’m going to like remembering.”

“Me too.”

He groaned and crushed me to him. He kissed me. Hard. I could feel his anger and rage over Father, but his desire and need were there too. The heavy emotions swirled around me like a boxer throwing punches. Quick bursts hit me every which way. I never knew where I was going to be hit next.

I pushed back from him. “Holy crap.”

I kept him at arm’s length. His shoulders bunched under my fingers. They felt like iron.

“What?” Confusion laced his words. His eyes were dark with desire.

“It’s . . .” I shook my head. Now that I had my memories, things were coming back to me at lightning speed. *This is what Father was talking about!*

My ability wasn’t limited to seeing clouds around people. I was able to do so much more. Father was right. The latest drug brought back all that I learned. What I had felt right now was so much stronger than anything I’d felt since waking up in April.

“Holy crap!” I said again.

Flint tensed. “What’s wrong?”

I smiled. “Your cloud . . . your aura . . . it’s so strong right now. It’s different feeling. *More*.”

He blinked and then slowly, understanding dawned. “That’s right. You can do more than just see clouds.”

“All of the years Father helped me work on it . . . I’d forgotten. Just like my identity. I’d forgotten how advanced my ability is.”

“And it’s not just you.”

I nodded. “Right, the twins, Di and Mica can do more too.”

During the past several years, Father began working with us more aggressively on our abilities. He hypothesized we’d be able to do more the older we became, similar to learning a sport or musical instrument, it could be strengthened and honed. With time, absolute control and coordination could be learned. However, that training stopped once the fire hit. Father’s obsession with the memory drug had taken precedence. I understood now what he and Di had been doing in the basement all of those months.

I shook my head as my memories lined up. It all made sense now.

I'd tried to practice my new skills on my own, while Father was too preoccupied in the lab with the memory drug, but it had been hard. I didn't know how to grow my ability. Not really at least. Sometimes I'd get lucky and be able to move small things. Usually, I just ended up with a headache for my efforts, very similar to how I felt right now.

That's probably why I'm feeling this way. It's from remembering my ability.

Flint took a deep breath. His energy relaxed, no longer feeling like a punching bag. Of course, it didn't have to be that way. One thing I *had* mastered was how to diffuse other's energy so it didn't affect me so much. If I concentrated, I could control Flint's cloud, keep it pushed back.

I hadn't known that until now.

I thought about all of the times over the past few months when those steady pushes and waves off Flint barreled into me. How at times it had taken my breath away from its sheer force and heat. I hadn't known then that I could stop it.

"That's definitely going to make life easier."

"And more interesting." He grinned. "Remember that time you knocked over the salt shaker on the table?"

I laughed. I'd done it as Jet sat down for lunch. He hadn't known that I was working on my ability. He'd jumped up, practically shrieking when the pepper shaker knocked over next.

Flint chuckled. "He started raving about poltergeists, saying one had taken up residence in the cabin."

I laughed harder. "And I didn't tell him until the next day."

"He barely slept that night. He was convinced the "spirit" was going to smother him in his sleep." Flint chuckled more loudly.

I fell back on the bed, clutching my sides. "I'd completely forgotten about that."

My words were like water dousing a fire. Flint's grin vanished. He was quiet for a moment, his eyes hard. "That's right. We forgot everything because of Conroy."

His energy picked up again, but I let it wash over me, like the bow of a ship pushing through waves. His energy dispersed around and behind.

I sat up. "But we remember now."

He pushed a stray curl behind my ear. A muscle clenched in his jaw. “I forgot about that night at the cave. The night we first made love.”

I fingered my bracelet. “That was the night you gave me this, on my eighteenth birthday.”

His eyes darkened. “It’s been a long time.”

Even though we’d been together for the last two months, we hadn’t had sex. In a way, I’d liked that. It built the suspense, heightened everything since we were still building toward the final show. But now, knowing we had been doing it, for years, in fact, was . . . weird.

I knew every inch of his body, every way to drive him crazy. I knew that the spot behind his left ear was more sensitive than the right. That he loved when I ran my hair along his chest while I trailed kisses down his stomach.

Flint moved closer. His thigh brushed mine. That sparse contact sent electricity racing along my nerves. “It’s been a very long time.”

My breath quickened. “Months.”

“I never thought I could go a day without having you when we first started.” He kissed me softly. “I thought I’d go crazy from seeing you across the room and not being able to touch you.” He trailed a finger along my thigh.

I closed my eyes and tilted my head back.

“I soon learned I had to wait, that sometimes we couldn’t get to the cave for days at a time. And in that time, I learned how to drive you crazy with just a look, or a soft kiss on the neck when I brushed your hair back, or how you liked when I bit your upper lip in a quick kiss.”

I pulled him back on the bed with me.

“You especially loved when I’d tease you.”

He slid out of his pants. The sound of my jeans unzipping came next. I lifted my hips as he shimmied them off me.

He bent down and kissed me, and using his fingers, he proved exactly how much he remembered pleasing me.

When he finally withdrew, I opened my eyes. His pupils were dark and dilated. Pent-up longing and need shone in them. I felt like a puddle of liquid honey.

“You were on the pill at one point,” he said.

When I turned eighteen, Father gave me birth control, like he gave everyone else in the house some form of protection.

“Do you know when you last took it?” he asked.

“No.” I still felt like liquid warmth in his arms.

“Until you’re on birth control again, we’re not doing it.”

Sighing, I closed my eyes. “I know.”

My head pounded again, but I tried to push it away and focus on our auras. Our power was so strong right now, as it always was whenever we fooled around.

Using what I could remember, I harnessed the clouds around us. I worked them together, concentrating deeply and groaning at how much effort it took. Slowly, it formed into a ball, but just as that ball became complete, something in my mind snapped.

I screamed, wrapping my hands around my head. My headache exploded. Stars shone in my gaze as another scream of pain ripped from my mouth.

“Lena?” Flint pushed up, pulling me to him. “Lena!”

His face faded in and out. I clung to him, pulling him toward me before I whispered, “Get Father.”

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Flint was off me and out of the room before I could blink. Somehow he managed to throw a blanket over me in the process. I moaned and cradled my head. Pulling myself into a ball, I turned on my side. The pain in my head was excruciating. It felt like my head would explode.

“Galena?” Father’s voice sounded.

A dip in the mattress told me he’d sat down. Gentle hands gripped my wrists and pried them from my head. “Galena, tell me what’s wrong.” His voice was quiet yet firm.

“My head . . .” I moaned. “My head hurts so badly!”

Father’s grip tightened for the merest second before he let go and gently pushed hair from my eyes. I could barely make out his features. My vision wasn’t right.

He felt along my skull and then down my neck. “When did this start?”

“It’s hurt since I woke up.” I winced when he touched the base of my neck.

Flint reappeared on my other side. “It’s hurt since you woke up?” His voice rose.

I winced.

“I’m sorry, babe.” Flint turned to Father. “Do something!”

Father ignored Flint and kept probing me. When he realized I had nothing on under the covers, he stood.

“Please wrap her in the blanket.”

Father turned just long enough for Flint to shimmy my panties back on and secure the blanket around me. I moaned again. The movement made everything throb.

“I’m sorry, babe . . . I’m trying to be gentle.” Flint’s tone and fingers shook. “She’s dressed.”

Di appeared behind Father. She wore pajamas, and her hair was mussed. “What’s going on?”

“Lena?” Jacinda’s voice called from the doorway.

“Everyone, please stay back,” Father said. “Except for you, Diamond. I’d appreciate your assistance.”

I opened my eyes to see fuzzy figures in the doorway. Everyone seemed to be awake. I wasn’t sure if Flint had woken the entire house on purpose or accidentally.

Di picked up my arm and felt my pulse. “Her heart’s ticking along pretty fast. Lena, what’s hurting?”

“Um . . . my head . . . it hurts. It’s pretty bad.”

My vision cleared just long enough to see Di and Father share a look. In that second, my insides grew cold.

“But I’m going to be okay, right? It’s just a bad headache.” I winced when a particularly hard pounding hit.

Flint took my other hand while Di continued to feel my pulse. He kissed the inside of my palm and smoothed the hair from my forehead. “Of course, it’s just a headache. You’re going to be fine. Right, Conroy?”

Father’s face tightened. “Bring her up to the study. My supplies and equipment are there. I need to check a few more things. Hurry.”

Flint lifted me and hurried behind Father and Di. Everyone parted when he carried me out the door. Jacinda whimpered, and from what I could see, Mica’s brown eyes were red. She stood numbly. It looked like she’d been crying.

The twins stood with their arms at their sides. Both looked like they tried to smile but only ended up grimacing when I passed. Only Amber was missing.

Flint followed Di and Father up the stairs and down the hall.

Father waved at a chaise lounge in the office. “Set her there please.”

Flint gently lowered me. My head touching the chaise made me cringe.

“How quickly has the pain grown?” Father pulled something from a bag.

I tried to watch but my lids kept closing. With every passing second, I grew more tired.

Father placed something around my arm. “Diamond, count her respirations for me.”

A pumping sounded. Whatever was on my arm constricted. A hiss followed as the constriction eased. I opened my eyes. Father was taking my blood pressure.

Father whipped the cuff off my arm. “Her systolic pressure is two-hundred and twenty.”

“Respirations are twenty-two. She’s tachycardic, her pulse is now one hundred and forty.”

Di stood and joined Father. I vaguely became aware that everyone else had moved to the doorway again. Flint still hunkered by my side, his eyes rimmed with worry.

“She’ll be okay, right?” Flint’s voice grew hoarse. “Right? Di?”

I wanted to reach for him, to comfort him but I felt so tired.

Father pulled more supplies from his bag. “Her blood pressure is dangerously high. I believe she’s suffering a side effect from the drug.”

“What side effect?” Fear coated Flint’s words.

“Cerebral over perfusion. Abnormal blood flow can result in the presence of severe hypertension. She’s at risk of ischemia and encephalopathy right now.”

“I thought this drug was safe!” Flint roared.

Father plunged a syringe into a vial. “No drug is completely safe. This is a very rare side effect. We need to get her blood pressure under control. Then we’ll deal with everything else.”

“Everything else?” Energy poured off Flint.

My headache worsened. I moaned and cradled my head again.

“Diamond?” Father said. “Please take Flint from the room. The rest of you,” he glanced at the doorway, “please wait in the living room. I need to work quickly and must concentrate.”

Di had to pull Flint from my side. My vision kept swimming in and out of focus. Everything went fuzzy so I couldn’t be sure how she made him leave.

“Galena? Are you still with me?”

I mumbled a response. My head *pounded*.

“Diamond, draw up the beta blocker. I’ll start the IV.”

Father grabbed a long thick rubber band. He tied it around my arm. “Stay with me, Galena.” He flicked a vein in my arm. “Please my child, stay with me.”

THE NEXT HOURS or days were a blurred, pain filled haze. Di and Father stayed at my side. Sometimes when I opened my eyes, Flint was there too. The dark circles lining his eyes had grown black. I tried to

squeeze him as he clutched my hand in his large palms, but my lids would grow heavy again and I'd drift off.

Voices occasionally permeated the fog, like whispered dreams that faded in and out of focus. At times, I didn't feel connected to my body. At one point, I thought I saw myself below, as if I hovered above everything, gazing down from the ceiling. It was as though I watched TV. I could see the room, the details and hear the sounds. During that strange dream, Di and Father had been frantically shouting to one another as they hurriedly raced from me to various supplies and back. I watched, feeling as light as air as they pumped drugs into my veins while doing compressions on my chest and hooking me up to a strange machine.

Flint had been in the corner of the room. He'd gripped his hair and sunk to the floor. His face was white as tears streamed down his cheeks. I wanted to comfort him, but I couldn't move.

Then, a strange mechanical voice sounded from the machine. Di and Father stepped back before Father pushed a button. My body jumped, my back arching. And then in the next second, I slammed down from above toward my body as if a giant anvil had crashed upon me.

It could have been hours, days or weeks before I opened my eyes to see sunlight shining through the window.

Flint's soft snores and the light bleeding through the bedroom's large window made me think I *had* been dreaming. That all of it wasn't real. That I was still at Hideaway Hills. That everything we'd discovered at the cabin hadn't happened. That we were still trying to figure out who we were and what happened to us.

Except Di was in the bedroom too. She lay asleep on the couch. Medical supplies littered the coffee table. And we weren't in the cabin at the ranch. Colorful, expensive looking artwork hung on the walls.

Something stuck out from my arm. I groaned when I recognized it.

An IV cannula.

The last time I saw that had been after Aaron attacked me. It seemed something bad had happened again.

It took a few minutes before the memories returned. Most things felt fuzzy but then a sharp image appeared. It was of Flint and me messing around on the bed while my head pounded. That had been right after Father gave us the memory drug.

The memory drug!

I nudged Flint. “Hey, wake up.”

In a flash, his eyes were open and he was leaning over me. “Lena!” His dark gaze frantically searched mine. “You’re awake! Di! Di! Wake up, Lena’s awake!”

Di mumbled something before sitting up. Her dark hair fell in messy strands around her face. It looked as if she hadn’t washed it in days.

“Lena?” Her eyes widened. “You’re awake!”

She rushed from the couch to my side. “How’s your head? How are you feeling? Do you remember what happened?”

“Get Conroy!” Flint said.

Di’s hands shook. “Of course. Keep her awake.”

Di rushed from the room. I looked at Flint to explain. Tears streamed down his face. “Lena! Lena!” He cupped my cheeks. Energy poured out of him in rivers. “Lena!”

“What’s wrong?”

His eyes widened. “You almost *died*. This is the first time you’ve been truly awake in days.” He pulled me to him, holding me gently as if afraid I’d break.

“What do you mean I almost died?”

He went on to explain what had happened during the past four days.

“Four days? I’ve been in and out of consciousness for four *days*?”

Flint nodded. “We almost took you to the hospital after your heart stopped, but then Conroy and Di got you stabilized. Conroy said he had the same drugs as the hospital, and that now it was just a matter of waiting to see when you’d wake up. If Conroy hadn’t had an AED in the house, you’d be dead.”

“An AED? Isn’t that used to restart someone’s heart?”

He nodded.

Father appeared in the doorway as Flint continued to hold me. Stubble covered Father’s face. His cheeks appeared sunken, as though he’d lost weight, and I wondered if he’d eaten or slept since giving us the memory drug.

“Galena,” he said hoarsely.

He approached the bedside before his legs gave out. Kneeling, he pulled me into a hug, a sob escaping him. There wasn’t a dry eye in the room when he pulled back.

“We almost lost you.” He smoothed the hair back from my face.

“That’s what Flint said.”

“Oh, my little, Galena.”

He pulled me back to him as everyone’s energy in the room washed over me. It was filled with love, pain and relief.

I knew in that moment how grave my situation had been. I breathed a sigh of thankfulness that I was okay.

FATHER INSISTED ON taking me to the nearest hospital for a CT and MRI. I knew things were serious when he said that. He wouldn’t risk this trip if he didn’t think it was necessary.

“What about the no hospital rule?” Because of my unique ability, I knew that areas of my brain would be active that were dormant in a normal person. Father had explained all of this to me when I’d been younger. It was the reason we’d never ventured to hospitals growing up.

“I know, but I want to make sure you don’t have permanent damage. I’m making an exception, but we still need to be careful. Follow my lead in public, keep your face hidden and don’t talk to anyone at the hospital unless necessary.”

Since the CT and MRI were both outpatient procedures, it didn’t require interacting with more than a few technicians. Father insisted on taking my medical records with him when they were done. He’d review them himself. He wouldn’t leave until the hospital wiped any trace of my having been there. The technicians eyed each other, curious looks in their eyes, but they did as Father asked.

Back at the indestructible home, Father reviewed the scans on his computer. I sat on a chair by the gas fire and waited for him to finish. Flint paced the room.

Father smiled when he reviewed the last image on his computer. “No permanent damage.”

I merely blew an annoying curl out of my face as afternoon sun washed into the study. “I could have told you that. I feel fine.”

Flint grumbled at that statement and placed his hands on his hips. “Next time Conroy asks you how you’re feeling, you better tell him the truth.”

Unfortunately, Flint hadn’t forgotten that I initially downplayed my headache, but he was right. I’d learned my lesson.

“I won’t. I promise.”

Pulling me up from the chair, Flint held me close. Father discreetly left the study, patting me on the shoulder as he walked by before closing the door behind him.

“That’s twice that I’ve almost lost you.” Flint’s large fingers threaded through my hair.

“Perhaps I’m part cat. Maybe I have nine lives.”

He smiled grimly. “I can’t lose you.”

My joking vanished. “I know. I’m sorry. I’ll be honest about how I’m feeling from now on.”

“You better keep that promise,” he growled before tilting my face up for a kiss.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

I spent the next two days resting in my bedroom per Father's orders. While the headaches had disappeared, the tiredness hadn't. It was crazy how the entire ordeal made me so groggy. However, the reprieve gave me plenty of time to reminisce over everything I remembered.

Thankfully, despite the dire side effect, that Father said only affected one in a million, I still remembered . . . everything.

My life.

My childhood.

That horrible place Father had taken us from.

The first time Flint and I made love.

All of it was real. Father had given us back our memories—side effects be damned.

Morning sunlight peeked through the curtains. It was the third day following my near-death. Flint lay asleep on the bed. The dark circles under his eyes had faded, but they were still there. I didn't disturb him. He needed to sleep.

Sitting up, I was surprised to find that my head felt fine today. Clear with no grogginess. And it was also the first morning since my ordeal that I also felt energetic. Pushing the covers back, I stood with a spring in my step.

Wild, dark red snarls flew around my face when I tiptoed into the bathroom and looked in the mirror. I kept remembering things as I brushed my teeth, things Flint and I had done, experiences we'd had. A smile played on my lips. It was only as I rinsed my mouth that I remembered my sudden theory before Father administered the memory antidote. A theory that, I hadn't realized, Father and I had actually come up with together years ago following my Seattle trip.

With wide eyes, I switched my vision. It happened immediately. Nothing cracked or hurt, not like it had the first night following the drug. I felt normal. My ability had returned full force.

My cloud appeared.

Except for this time, it was different.

I stared in awe at the new, third color. Pale green shimmered among the blue and bright green. It was the same pale green that Father had in his cloud. My cloud was turning into a rainbow, like Father's. The gears shifted in my mind. Our theory had most likely been correct.

Keeping my vision altered, I walked back into the bedroom. Flint was still asleep, but his cloud billowed around his sleeping form. The same pale green I had in my cloud also intermixed with his blue and orange. I'd bet money all of the others now had pale green in their clouds too.

I sat on the bed, letting my vision switch back to normal. I knew where the colors came from.

The drugs.

Each drug Father had administered to us showed up in our clouds. It was exactly what Father and I had hypothesized all those years ago, after my Seattle trip, when we first talked about what I saw around people there. The drugs changed our brains like they changed our clouds.

My bright green was obviously unique to me. It was the drug that allowed me to see a person's aura, and the blue was the drug Father administered to us in April, the drug that made us forget. And now, the pale green was from the drug that made us remember.

Father had said that he'd taken all of our ability creating drugs, the first generation versions, plus a dozen more drugs that had never panned out. I thought about how Father's cloud colors were fainter, not as vibrant as ours. I guessed that was because the first generation drugs weren't as potent. That since they hadn't resulted in complete transformations, just partial, his brain wasn't altered as much. But the blue and pale green in his cloud appeared identical to mine. Those had to be from the memory drugs.

Father hadn't been lying. He really had taken all of the drugs. His cloud couldn't lie.

I briefly contemplated the twin's clouds. Jasper had yellow, yet Jet had red. Father had hypothesized it was because the twins metabolized their telepathy drug differently. However, since they both had the same blue as the rest of us, they'd obviously metabolized that one the same.

My gaze inched to the door. I really needed to talk to Father. It appeared our theory was correct.

Flint turned in bed. A soft snore filled the room. The clock read just past six. I cocked my head. I didn't hear anybody moving upstairs.

I still itched to pull the door open, but with a sigh, I sat back down on the bed. If there was one thing I was really good at, it was being impulsive, and if there was one thing I was really *bad* at, it was controlling my impulsive desires. If I burst upstairs right now, I'd probably wake the entire house.

Taking a deep breath, I tried to calm my excitement. My conversation with Father could wait another hour. He, Di and Flint had gone too many days without sleep. I slipped under the warm covers and stared at the ceiling, thinking about the rainbow of colors in Father's cloud.

He really had tried everything on himself first. Our safety had been that important to him.

FLINT ROUSED ABOUT an hour later. As soon as he did, he pulled me tightly to him. During the past two days, he'd barely left our bedroom. It was as if he thought I'd keel over and die any second.

"Good morning," I said.

His eyes cracked open. He yawned and pushed up onto an elbow. For a moment, he studied me, his eyes still hooded from sleep. "You look like you've been up for a while."

"Over an hour."

He pushed to sitting, his brow furrowing. "Are you okay? Do you have another headache?"

"No, nothing like that." I shook my head. "It's something else. My cloud's different now and yours is too."

I told him about the new color.

"So the reason we all have colors *is* because of the drugs." Flint also knew about Father's and my theory. I'd told him years ago.

"I think so, and that's why Conroy's cloud is so colorful because he *did* take all of the drugs first. He wanted to make sure they were safe."

Flint frowned.

I could tell from his expression that he wasn't sure how to feel about that. My brush with death only solidified in Flint's mind that Father's drugs were a menace, and we were better off never taking any of them again. However, if Father really *had* taken all of our drugs first, even the

dangerous ones that resulted in our abilities, then he couldn't be evil like Flint claimed he was.

"He cares about our safety. You have to at least agree with that."

"You almost died, Lena."

"And I knew the memory drug didn't come without risks. I chose to take that risk."

"You should have never had to risk anything in the first place!" Hot energy poured off him. He raked a hand harshly through his hair. "We should have never been administered any of those drugs, *ever*."

I sighed heavily. "Okay, okay. You have a point." Movement sounded above. A creak in the floor. I glanced at the ceiling. "Everyone's getting up."

"So I hear." Flint stood. A second later, I heard the bathroom faucet running. Flint was gone. I sighed. He'd moved at his speed into the bathroom. In other words, he'd disappeared.

I sighed again as a deep sadness engulfed me. Maybe sooner or later, Flint would come around about Father. However, I knew that wasn't going to happen anytime soon. Flint had spent the last twenty-some years thinking Father was the bad guy, and my reaction to the antidote had only made it worse.

I JOINED THE others upstairs while Flint showered. As soon as I stepped into the living room, I knew something was off. A tense energy hung in the air. Jacinda sat on a couch, drinking a cup of coffee. The delicious scent wafted my way. Loud arguing voices came from the kitchen. It sounded like Jasper and Mica.

Jacinda grinned when she saw me. "How are you feeling?"

It seemed to be the question everyone asked me these days. "Fine." I sat beside her. "What's going on?"

"Mica's letting Jasper have it. She's pretty upset that he hooked up with Amber."

Right. Of course. Funny how almost dying made me forget the other dramas going on.

Just then, Mica strode angrily from the kitchen into the living room. Jasper followed. I switched my vision. Their clouds appeared exactly as I predicted. Both now had pale green in them. I snapped my sight back to normal.

“How could you have done that to me!” Mica practically screamed. “I gave you my virginity and then you hook up with *her?”*

“I didn’t know, baby,” Jasper pleaded. “I didn’t know!”

Amber appeared from the hallway leading to their bedrooms. Puffy skin lined her eyes, as if she’d been crying. Mica sneered when she saw her.

“You couldn’t wait to sink your teeth into him, could you!” Mica spat. “I knew you always wanted him!” Mica’s face turned bright red. Her energy strummed to me. I felt it flow over me, like hot crackling electricity.

The force of it took me by surprise. I quickly tuned it out. When I did, it settled over me like a light drizzle of rain. I could barely feel it.

“Let’s all calm down.” Jasper held up his hands, his voice soothing. He looked at Mica intently, his gaze focused.

For a moment, her energy dimmed as if being doused. The second that happened, she stalked to Jasper and slapped him across the cheek. The loud crack made me jump.

“How dare you!” she seethed. “First you cheat on me, then you try to use your powers on me?” With that, she stomped from the room.

Mica swept past Amber on her way out. The youngest member of our group scampered out of the way. My heart went out to both of them, surprisingly. A week ago, I would have sided with Mica in a heartbeat, but now . . .

Since the memory antidote, my opinion about Amber had changed. My anger and annoyance with her over the past few months was still there, but so was my knowledge of the person she was *before* the memory drugs.

Before I could do anything to help either of them, Amber turned and bolted. The only person left was Jasper. He stood by the window, hanging his head.

Jet walked into the room from the kitchen. He ate a piece of toast. In the quiet room, the crunching noise was amplified. He sauntered over to Jasper and clapped his brother on the back.

“Nice one, bro. You’ve successfully pissed off half the women in this house. And nice try with your abilities. If Mica didn’t know you could do that, it might have worked.”

Jasper shoved him off and stalked from the room.

I sat there, wide-eyed.

We’d all had our moments growing up where we argued or fought, but never quite like that. Never so vehemently.

“This isn’t good,” Jacinda murmured. “Both Mica and Amber are crying in their rooms right now.”

Of course, Jacinda would know. She could probably hear the tears rolling down their cheeks.

I sighed heavily. “What a mess.”

Jacinda squeezed my hand. “It’s good to see you up and moving. Let’s catch up later. Right now, I want to check on Amber.”

A subtle push of energy rolled into my back as Jacinda walked away. Without turning, I knew who it was. The feel and warmth of it was so familiar. Flint stood motionless by the stairwell, staring down the hall in the direction Mica, Jasper and Amber had gone. I guessed he’d witnessed the entire scene.

Jet finished his toast. “Hungry anyone? I was thinking of making some eggs.”

I ignored him and joined Flint by the stairwell. He put his arm around me and steered me to the kitchen. “See what I mean?” he seethed. “Conroy’s drugs have really messed with everyone’s lives. A good person would never do that.”

I swallowed my uncertainty. “He couldn’t have known that would happen. He honestly thought we’d never see one another again and that we’d make new lives for ourselves. Remember?”

Flint snorted and opened a few cupboards until he found where the coffee mugs lived. “Where is dear old dad, anyway? Shouldn’t he be the one cleaning up this mess?”

I bit my lip. I wondered if Father knew what was happening. “I’ll go find him. I want to ask him a few things anyway.”

I FOUND FATHER in the study. He sat at a desk that faced a window, although instead of studying or working, he simply sat there, staring out the window, an unreadable expression on his face. The desert shrubs glowed in the morning sun, the mountains purple in the distance. A hot, steaming cup of coffee sat beside him. It appeared untouched.

“Father?”

He jumped. “Galena, you startled me.”

“Sorry.” I stepped into the room and eased the door shut.

He stood and approached me, a frown on his face. “How are you feeling? Any new headaches? Blurred vision? Balance issues?”

“No, I’m fine. Really, I am. I came in here to talk to you about something else.”

The concern on his face disappeared. He let out a relieved sigh. “Of course.” With the wave of a hand, he invited me to sit with him in one of the overstuffed armchairs in front of the cold fireplace. The study was decorated like the rest of the house. Modern, sleek and expensive looking. I was a little surprised when I sat down and the chair was actually comfortable. That was a first.

Father shifted in his seat. “Are you sure you haven’t had any new headaches?”

“Nope, none at all. I feel fine. Really. But . . . um . . . I’m not sure everyone else is okay.”

Father frowned deeply. “I overheard some of what was said.”

His energy rolled toward me. It was crazy how in tune I was getting with everyone.

Father glanced toward the door. “It seems I’ve made a mess of things. What I had hoped to accomplish was to give you all free, normal lives. However, we’re now on the run, our family is fighting and you almost died.” He glanced down. His hands shook. “Galena, I cannot apologize enough for what I did to you. I never anticipated any of you would have a reaction like you did. I’ve never seen a reaction that severe from a mild mind altering medication. The memory drugs shouldn’t have done that. It was incredibly bad luck that it affected you like that.”

I laid my hand over his. “I know. You don’t need to explain again. I don’t blame you.”

“I almost killed you.”

“And you saved me too. You need to let this go, Father. Please don’t blame yourself.”

His hazel eyes misted over when he lifted them to mine. “You’ve always been so forgiving, always finding the good in others.”

“Who do you think I learned that kindness from?”

He wiped his eyes and squeezed my hand. “Now, what is it you sought me out for? I’m guessing if you’re done resting then you’re feeling better and want to talk about what you’ve remembered. Most of your brothers and sisters have.”

I nodded. There were two things I definitely wanted to talk about: colorful clouds and birth control.

“We have new colors in our clouds.” I leaned forward. “From when we last saw you—blue and pale green. I think we were right. The colors are from the drugs.”

Father cocked his head. Now that I had all of my memories, I knew this wasn’t the first time we’d discussed what I saw around others. Prior to my Seattle trip, I thought everybody had color in their clouds. So had Father. He’d had no reason to think our clouds were different than anybody else’s. However, when I switched my vision in Seattle and saw the sea of white and black around the general public I’d realized *we* were different. Not them.

“So it *is* from the drugs,” he said.

I nodded. “All of us have blue now, and from what I’ve seen so far, pale green too. The blue must be from the drug six months ago. Ever since I met, I mean re-met everyone in August, we’ve had blue in our clouds.”

“So the memory drug is blue, and the antidote is pale green.”

“It seems so.” I thought about the twins’ clouds. “Jet and Jasper must have metabolized their memory drugs similarly. Both of them have the same blue.”

“I used a different medium for the memory drugs. That would make sense.”

He was quiet after he said that. I could see the gears shifting in his mind. It was a common expression on his face. Father was always thinking.

“The memory drugs must have been mind altering,” he said. “To have caused colors.”

We’d deduced years ago, following my trip to Seattle, that only the potent mixtures created by O’Brien Pharmaceuticals could create big enough changes in people to cause aura shifts. Normal drugs, like ibuprofen, heart and diabetes medication and so forth didn’t cause changes. Otherwise, everybody would have colorful clouds.

He tapped his chin. “Yes, they have to be but nowhere near as altering as the ones you received as babies.” He sat up straighter. Some of the fatigue left his eyes. His energy didn’t feel quite as heavy either. I knew if I wanted to pull Father from a sad mood, the best way to do it was science talk.

“So they didn’t permanently alter our brains?” I asked.

“No, they didn’t permanently alter your brain chemistries. Just temporarily until the antidote was given, but obviously enough to cause

changes in your auras."

I asked him more about how he'd felt after he'd taken the first memory drug. In typical Father fashion, he broke it down completely. Everything in the world could be turned into a science project, at least to Father.

"There's something else I want to ask you," I said after we finished talking about the drugs. I squirmed for a moment. It was silly. As soon as we'd all reached puberty and gone through health class in our home school, Father had laid down the ground rules very succinctly. No sex until eighteen. After that, birth control would be readily available. No questions asked.

"I don't have birth control," I finally said.

Understanding dawned in his eyes. "Of course, and you and Flint are together again." He stood. "I'll be right back."

I stared out the window while he was gone, my shoulders slumping in relief. That hadn't been as awkward as I'd feared.

He returned a minute later.

"Here you go." He handed me a few packets. "We should really take you in for a proper exam. You and the other women. It's something I've known for years I needed to do, but in the Hills it was impossible."

"Oh." I hadn't thought of that either. I broke open one of the packets.

"Do you remember how to take them?"

"I think so."

"Let me explain. Just to be safe." He launched into a lengthy and thorough explanation about how the first course of medication had to be timed with my period so Flint and I couldn't have sex right away. He also explained what the pills consisted of, side effects, its success rate, how it didn't protect against STD's, and so on. The conversation went on for at least thirty minutes.

I felt completely humbled and educated by the time he got done, even though it was all review. A short burst of relief flowed through me that I really *did* have all of my memories back, but in typical Father fashion, he educated me anyway. And to think I thought this meeting would be brief and awkward.

"Thank you." I didn't realize until that moment how much I'd missed him. His comforting manner did something to me that was very similar to Flint's presence. I felt safe.

When I returned to the living room, it was empty. A few distant showers sounded in the bedrooms. I figured everyone was finally getting dressed. A figure appeared through the wall of windows overlooking the backyard. Mica appeared to be walking alone outside. I bit my lip. I was about to go to her when a voice stopped me.

"It went well?"

I spun. Flint sat on a stool at the large, granite island in the kitchen. A glass of orange juice and a plate of scrambled eggs and toast sat in front of him. A second full plate sat beside him. I didn't have to ask to know that was for me.

"Yeah. It went well, very well."

He raised an eyebrow. "Do you want to join me and tell me about it?"

I grabbed a piece of toast and kissed him quickly. "I'll tell you all about it, but I need to do something else first."

His gaze followed mine to the back windows. "She's been out there for the last twenty minutes."

"She was pretty upset when she left."

Flint sighed and dumped my eggs onto his plate. "Good thing I'm hungry."

DOWNSTAIRS, I COULDN'T figure out how to open the door or wall or whatever the hell it was to the backyard. Kicking it in frustration, I raced back upstairs and asked Father the password. After another annoying five minutes, I finally figured the damn thing out and was in the backyard.

Mica was nowhere to be seen.

Bright sunlight streamed down as I hopped along the stone walkway. I dipped around shrubs, trees and cactuses. The trickle from the fountain reached my ears a few minutes later.

When I rounded a turn, the fountain appeared. Mica sat close to it, throwing pebbles into the water.

Her gaze snapped to mine. They were rimmed with red. "Lena! You're up."

I sat beside her. The ground was ridiculously cold. Again, I wondered how long this fountain would keep running. "How are you doing?"

Her eyed widened. "Shouldn't I be asking you that? You're the one who almost died." A flash of guilt crossed her face. "I'm sorry I haven't

spent more time with you in your room while you've been resting. It's been . . . I . . ."

"I get it. Really, I do."

We sat in silence for a moment. She picked up more pebbles and threw them. I inched closer to her. Another moment of silence passed before I said, "I'm sorry about what's happened with Jasper."

She sighed humorlessly and tried to smile. "Bastard, not Jasper. Let's call him Bastard from now on."

I flinched. "You must be pretty pissed off."

She flung another pebble into the fountain. It hit the base and skittered into the water. "I'm more than just pissed off. I'm freakin' irate!" Her chest rose and fell heavily.

I waited a moment before saying, "Have you talked to him about it?"

"No. He keeps trying to get me to 'discuss it' with him, but then he tried that crap this morning with his powers. What did he think? That if he couldn't talk to me like a normal person, he could persuade me to not be mad at him anymore?"

"That wasn't a smart thing for him to do. I completely agree."

Mica picked up more pebbles but her throwing grew less and less. Tears streamed down her cheeks again. "It hurts so damn much."

I put my arm around her shoulders and pulled her close.

"I mean, the rational side of me is saying that he didn't know we were together so I shouldn't be mad at him, but my heart keeps breaking."

I squeezed her harder.

"And then I look at you and Flint. I mean seriously, even when your memories were gone, you still only had eyes for each other. That's true love. That's the way it's supposed to be. So what does that mean? That Jasper and I aren't right for each other? That we shouldn't actually be together?"

"I don't think that's what it means."

Mica sniffed and wiped her tears. A breeze ruffled her shoulder length hair. "Then what do you think it means?"

I shrugged awkwardly. "That you were two people who met as strangers and didn't have the memories of your history anymore. That you started new, like when we were kids. Friends first."

"Until Amber came along," she said bitterly.

"Have you talked to her?"

“No, and I have no desire to talk to her ever again.”

I softened my tone. “You’re hurting, I see that, but Amber didn’t know what you and Jasper had. None of us knew.”

“Do you really think it would have changed things if she had?”

I sighed. Mica had a point. Memories of how Amber behaved when we first re-met swirled through my mind. Within two days of picking her up at the airport, Amber had tried to come between Flint and me. She’d lied and hurt me intentionally, but I also knew she’d never done anything like that growing up.

“The drug changed her,” I finally said. “She never acted like that before.”

Mica snorted. “Changed her or revealed who she always was but we just never saw it?”

I had no idea how to respond to that. It was another intricacy we may never explain. There could be truth in that. Growing up, Amber had always been a kind, sweet girl. The petty, malicious one I’d known since Hideaway Hills was a complete one-eighty from who I knew her as.

“I haven’t seen any of her immaturity since this latest drug.”

“Well, you have been rather preoccupied the past few days, with almost dying and all.” Mica’s voice caught. “God, I’m such an awful sister! I should have been with you for the past two days, seeing what I could do to help you, not moping around because of Jasper.” She turned to face me. Tears filled her eyes again. “I’m sorry.” She pulled me into a tight hug. “I’m so glad you’re okay.”

I hugged her back. “I’m fine. Seriously, I am. And you don’t need to be sorry and you don’t need to worry about me.”

Mica pulled back and smiled when my hair tangled around her ear. “You’re really not mad at me for being so selfishly preoccupied?” She pulled another strand of my hair off her face and rolled her eyes. “Jeez, girl. You always had too much hair.”

I chuckled and pushed my hair behind my shoulder. “I’m really *not* mad. Okay?”

She gripped my hands in hers. “Okay, but please know that I’m really happy you’re okay. All of us were really worried.”

“I seem to be causing a lot of worries with my injuries lately.”

Mica just sighed. “And here I am, crying about a stupid boy.”

“That *boy* happens to be your first love. There’s nothing stupid about that so stop apologizing.”

She smiled then, a real smile. “You’ve always been able to make me feel better. I’m glad that hasn’t changed.”

We stood and strolled back to the house. By the time we returned, Mica’s tears had dried and she was smiling again. I had no idea what the future held for Mica, Jasper, Amber and the rest of us, but if we were returning to O’Brien we’d need to find a way to all work together again.

Our lives may depend on it.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The next few days passed quicker than I could have imagined. Things with Jasper, Mica and Amber simmered down. A little. My conversation with Mica seemed to have cracked the possibility of her talking to him again. And while Mica still seemed miffed with Amber, venom no longer dripped in her every word when they spoke.

Baby steps. That was how we were all dealing with things.

The energy floating through the house had definitely kicked up a notch with all of the emotions and turmoil. It was impossible for me to not notice despite my newly remembered ability to control the energy around me. At times, it felt as if I was walking through electrically charged soup. It could be exhausting.

It hadn't escaped my attention either that O'Brien Pharmaceuticals had fallen to the back burner. With the return of our memories, my nearly fatal reaction to the drug, and the dysfunctional dynamic that ensued meant our relationships had taken a beating. However, things slowly seemed to be mending. There had been a lot of conversations over the past few days, not just between Amber, Mica and Jasper but between all of us and Father.

It seemed Flint wasn't the only one angry with Father. Jasper, Mica and Amber were too. That wasn't surprising considering what happened. To try and deal with it, Father sat with all of them and talked through things while Di defended Father's decision vehemently. Di was so devoted to Father he probably could have run her over with a two-ton truck and she would have merely stood up and brushed herself off.

And then there were our additional powers to deal with.

Just like I'd remembered my ability to see plant and animal clouds, and my elusive ability to join clouds into energy balls, the twins had also remembered their abilities to manipulate emotions and thought patterns, and Di had remembered her ability to control her visions. Mica could do more too, but she seemed more preoccupied with Jasper than on discovering how to control it.

Needless to say, it had been a whirlwind of a week.

I slipped on a pair of socks as I sat on a counter stool. Scents of pasta pescatore floated through the air. We were all in the kitchen at the moment, helping to prepare supper. I took heart in that. It was the first time all week the nine of us were together in one room and nobody was fighting.

My gaze lingered on the view as I pulled my pants back over my socks. The desert was awash in the fading sun. A few birds of prey circled in the sky, and the mountains glowed purple. The sun glinted off the huge dining table that easily seated ten. It sat at the edge of the kitchen, running parallel to the monstrous windows. The view from the dining table was impressive, to say the least.

Father and Jacinda cooked at the stove. Steam billowed up from the kettle boiling the pasta, while the sauce simmered gently in a separate pan. Jet stood at the island, fixing a salad while Mica made the garlic bread. Jasper, Flint and Di were busy setting the table and filling water glasses when Father asked Amber and me to grab a few bottles of wine.

“They should be in the cellar,” he said.

I hopped off the stool and headed downstairs with Amber. She silently trailed behind. Her energy strummed softly toward me. Sadness made it heavy.

Whoever had stocked the pantry, freezer and refrigerator before our arrival had been very thorough. The number of ingredients was endless. The wine cellar was no different. Hundreds of bottles of wine stared back at us in the cool, dry room.

“What should we choose?” Amber wore black leggings and a baggy sweater. The top seemed to hang on her.

“Um, good question.” I had no idea what wine went best with Italian seafood. We’d been educated on that sort of thing during our Real Life Etiquette course, but since that topic had seemed so trivial to me, I hadn’t paid much attention. Unfortunately, it appeared Amber hadn’t either.

“I’m trying to remember what we learned.” She bit her lip. “I think white goes best with seafood, but the pescatore sauce is tomato based. So does that mean red?”

I studied her closer. Dark circles rimmed her eyes. “So not white but red?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. Maybe we should bring up a couple of bottles and let Father decide.”

We both grabbed an armful and returned to the stairs. Her movements were slow and lethargic.

"So . . ." I walked carefully up each step. "How have you been?"

"Fine."

Her reply was too quick and automatic. Anyone with eyes could see that she wasn't fine. "Have you spoken to Jasper or Mica today?"

She shook her head.

"They seem to be talking to each other again."

"Yeah. I know," Amber replied quietly.

My heart broke a little at her sad tone. Since we'd regained our memories, Amber had changed. She seemed more like the young woman I remembered from before Father's drugs. She wasn't nearly as flirty as she had been at Hideaway Hills, and she didn't act quite as spoiled or immature. Being the youngest, she'd definitely been babied during her life, but she hadn't had it easy.

Growing up, we'd all formed close friendships and relationships within our group. The siblings, of course, had an inherent bond: Di and Flint, Jet and Jasper, me and Jacinda. But then the long-term relationships had formed: Flint and me, Jasper and Mica.

The only one who'd never been part of a relationship, or had a sibling, was Amber. I didn't think I fully appreciated how lonely she probably felt because of that. Until now.

"I'm sorry things didn't work out for you and Jasper."

She shrugged again. "S'okay."

I stopped when we reached the top of the stairs and put my hand on her arm, which was awkward with how many bottles I carried. She stopped and faced me. Wide, brown eyes, rimmed with tears stared back.

"You know you're as much a part of this family as anyone else. You know that, right?"

She nodded.

"And you know that we all love you, even if we fight sometimes?"

A small smile tugged up her lips. "Are you trying to make up for all of those years when you told me I was a big baby?"

I grimaced. "Me? Did I do that?"

Her smile grew a little larger.

I sighed. "Yeah, okay. I was like an annoyed older sister with my baby sibling. Will you forgive me?"

“I forgave you a long time ago.”

Her eyes were genuine and soft. How different the real Amber was from the one I’d met two months ago at Hideaway Hills. I knew in that moment Mica had it wrong. The real Amber wasn’t petty and immature, hiding her real nature our entire lives. The real Amber was this one, standing right in front of me. “I’m glad you’re back to your old self. I didn’t much care for the newer one.”

“You’re not the only one who should apologize. I’m sorry I lied to you about taking that ride with Flint. If I had known what it would turn into—”

I gripped her tighter. “It’s okay. It’s in the past now.”

“Do you mean that?” Her eyes grew wide and hopeful.

“Yes.”

She sighed. “Good. I thought you hated me.”

“I will never hate you, but I can’t promise I won’t get irritated every now and then.”

“You irritate me too sometimes.”

I laughed. A bottle almost slipped out of my arms. Amber caught it just in time.

We both laughed then. I nodded toward the kitchen. “We better get back before these stairs become covered in pinot and shattered glass.”

A soft giggle was her response.

Back in the kitchen, we deposited our goods on the counter. I gave Amber a quick hug. She smiled a little wider when I pulled back. Overall, she didn’t look quite as somber as she had downstairs.

Jet raised his eyebrows when he saw the nine bottles of wine on the counter. “Have we turned over a new leaf? Nobody’s allowed to go to bed anymore unless one’s completely intoxicated?”

Amber laughed, at which Jet’s eyes lit up. I’m sure it wasn’t lost on him that it was the first time Amber had really laughed in days.

“Those are all for me, Jet,” Jasper cut in. “You know how I love my wine.”

The smile on Amber’s face vanished. She ignored Jasper and joined Jacinda, mumbling something about helping her. Jacinda put an arm around Amber’s shoulders and squeezed.

I sighed. It would definitely take a while before our family got in sync again.

“All right, supper’s ready,” Father said. “Let’s all sit down.”

Everyone picked up dishes and carried them to the table.

"Which wine?" I asked.

Father surveyed the bottles sitting on the island. Chairs being pulled back from the table made a scraping sound in the room. Father leaned down and surveyed the bottles' labels. "This one and this one."

I glanced at the wines. Sangiovese and Malbec. Pretty sure Amber and I would have never gotten that right.

"Let's eat before this gets cold." Jet had already dished a huge serving of pasta onto his plate.

Father grabbed the wine openers and popped the corks. One by one, we all sat. Each dish was passed from person to person, along with the two bottles of wine Father had chosen. It was so normal and familiar that my earlier anxiety over our family's energy subsided. Feeling a bit better, I swirled pasta onto my fork as everyone chatted with one another.

I lifted another bite to my mouth when Di abruptly asked, "When are we going to O'Brien?"

I almost dropped the utensil but managed to swallow without choking too much. Everyone else grew silent. Flint put an arm around my shoulders. I took some comfort from the contact and wiped a few drips of pasta sauce off my shirt.

Father finished chewing his food and took a sip of wine. "I've made a few inquiries to my O'Brien contacts about how many lost children are still being held. I should have an answer in a day or two."

Jacinda's honey-brown eyes widened. "So, we're still going?"

"Of course, we're still going," Di replied. "If there are others like us, still alive, we can't leave them."

The room blazed red as the setting sun shot through the glass. The walls seemed bathed in blood. Di was right. We couldn't leave them. That wasn't an option.

I took a sip of wine as an uneasy feeling settled in my stomach. I felt Flint's eyes on me. The worry was back on his face. I tried to smile.

I couldn't.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

The next morning it seemed with each passing minute, the tension in the house grew. There was no further update from Father's outside contacts. We were waiting for them to reveal how many lost children were still captive, where they currently resided and how they were guarded. Until then, we had no idea what we were up against.

Flint and I sat on the couch. He practiced his lock picking skills on locks Father bought at the local home improvement store while I practiced my newly remembered energy skills. It was hard to concentrate, though. Each time I almost combined two clouds, as sweat beaded on my forehead, the ball broke apart. A certain someone kept making "hmm's" and "ah's" as she researched things online.

Di sat on the living room floor, an online map of Chicago in front of her. O'Brien Pharmaceuticals was based outside the city. Father had said the building where we'd been kept fronted as a warehouse in an industrial part of town. Unless they'd moved Project Renatus, Father guessed the other lost children still lived there.

I swallowed uneasily. Vivid images of that research day at Little Raven's public library, all of those months ago, kept cropping to the forefront of my mind. That was the day Di had her first vision of Chicago. The vision where she saw all eight of us in Chicago.

I had no doubt we were going to the city. Di's visions always came true. Only now, I knew *why* we were going back to where it all began.

To free other lost children.

"There are only two entry points." Di studied an aerial photo of the warehouse. "The front doors and the loading dock. Seems kind of limited for such a big building, don't you think?"

Jasper leaned forward. He sat behind Di on a chair. Mica sat on the chair beside him. Jasper and Mica's hands were entwined. It was the first time I'd seen them touch all week.

"Probably doesn't meet fire code," Jasper replied.

I tried to tune them out, but as hard as I tried I couldn't concentrate. Between Di's random comments and questions, and the noise coming from down the hall where Jacinda, Jet and Amber were watching a movie, a lot was going on.

A click sounded. Flint successfully picked his last lock. He leaned over when I let out another groan of frustration. *Damned energy balls!*

"Want to get out of here?"

With a sigh of relief, I let my sight snap back to normal. "Please."

FLINT AND I strolled hand in hand around the huge backyard. The mid-afternoon November sun shone high in the sky. A cool breeze caressed our cheeks. It felt nice, as if I could finally breathe.

It was good to be outside for a change, since we hadn't been able to do anything as relaxing, or as normal, as taking a walk for no reason. However, I had a feeling this reprieve wouldn't last long.

Father had been on the phone when we stepped out. He'd shut his study door when we walked by, his voice lowering, the words muffled. I considered going back to ask Jacinda what was being said, but Flint tugged me down the stairs. I was glad he had. For once, I just wanted to forget everything.

"How's Amber doing?" Flint's thumb rubbed my hand as we strolled.

I shrugged. That was one of the many million dollar questions. Other than the brief conversation Amber and I had last night, I hadn't spoken with her again about Jasper.

"I don't know. She was pretty upset last night, and I feel as badly for her as I do for Mica. Before, at Hideaway Hills, she drove me crazy with her spoiled pouting and immature acts. But now, since I can remember her from *before* that, I feel differently. She never acted like that before Father's drug. I kind of wonder if something inside her unleashed when we all met up. It was as if her subconscious knew it was her one and only chance to really change her place in our group, so she wouldn't always be the outcast."

"Do you know she found me this morning and apologized for trying to flirt with me when we first met? She also apologized again for lying about that ride she said we took together, on that day you . . ." His hand tightened around mine.

I knew it was still hard for him to remember that day. It had been over eight weeks since that incident. That was the day I'd gone riding in the mountains, by myself, after Amber told me she and Flint were meeting for a secret horseback ride.

During my mad dash to get away from the ranch, I'd encountered Aaron in a ravine. The psychotic cowboy had tried to attack me, but I'd escaped. Unfortunately, as I galloped away in sheer panic, I was thrown from my horse and collided with a tree. A few cracked ribs and a concussion were the results of that accident. I was lucky I hadn't broken my neck. Even though everything had turned out okay, I knew it still haunted Flint. In his eyes, he'd come close to losing me. It wasn't something he'd likely forget anytime soon.

We never did find out what became of Aaron. He'd vanished without a trace, having never returned for his belongings or his last paycheck at the ranch. Of course, he probably knew what else would be waiting for him: an arrest warrant.

I tugged Flint's hand. "Amber apologized to me too last night. It appears she's trying to make amends."

Flint didn't respond. His eyes carried that haunted faraway look.

I did my best to coax him out of the mood he was falling into. "Have you or Di talked about how we're getting to Minnesota?"

Father and Di believed flying into Minneapolis' airport and driving to Chicago was safer than flying directly to Chicago. I supposed they had a point. *If* O'Brien had people looking for us, reason deemed that more of those employees were stationed in the Chicago area versus other states.

"We figured we'd either fly in Conroy's jet or fly commercially," Flint replied.

"Wouldn't his jet be recognized?"

Flint shrugged. "Only Conroy can answer that, but I'm guessing everything he owned before he left O'Brien, he got rid of."

"Commercial flights are so public. I can't imagine Father agreeing to that."

Flint frowned. "No, I can't either."

THE MOVIE THAT Jet, Jacinda and Amber had been watching was finished when we returned to the house. Scents of popcorn hung in the air, but no one lingered in the theater. Father's study was also empty when we

passed. Voices carried from the living room. It sounded like a heated discussion.

"We need to leave tonight!" Di said.

We rounded the corner just in time to see Jet throw his hands in the air. "We can't tonight, Di! We're not ready!"

"You may not be ready, but I am." Her dark eyes flashed. "We've already been here a week, and Lena's doing just fine now. What do you think I've been doing while she recovers? I've already spent hours studying the warehouse, watching live video feed, and devising the best way to get inside. I haven't been sitting around twiddling my thumbs."

Jet gave Di an incredulous look. "How did you watch live video feed?"

Di shrugged defiantly. "I hacked into their system."

"I wish *I* had been included in the elite hacking team when you three learned," Jet muttered.

Jasper clapped him on the back. "If you were as smart as me, you would have been."

Jet scowled at his brother.

"Do you remember your hacking skills?" I asked Flint.

"Before our memories came back, no, but now, yeah, I remember."

He said it so casually. As if it was no big deal to hack into a corporation's hidden files. I turned to Father. "Did you hear from your contacts?"

Father nodded. "Yes. According to him, Project Renatus is still running. Although nowhere near as actively as it was fifteen years ago. Only three subjects are . . ." his voice caught. He cleared his throat. "Only three subjects are still alive. The rest have died."

I gasped. "But I thought . . ." I took a shaky breath. "I thought there were twenty other kids, besides us?"

"There were, initially at least." Father shook his head, looking down. "When I took you all away, there will still sixteen other children left behind. Four had died in the other groups. They were also too old when the drug was administered. Just like the oldest twins that died in your group."

My mouth fell open. "So that means that *thirteen* other kids died over the years since we left?"

"Yes." An anguished expression crossed Father's face. "If only I could have taken *all* of you with me, but I . . ." His voice cracked.

Jacinda clasped his hand. “You did everything you could. You couldn’t have known what would happen to them.”

“I should have done something. *Anything*.” Guilt hung so heavily in Father’s cloud, it felt as if it would swallow me.

Jacinda squeezed his hand again.

A few moments of silence passed before Mica said quietly, “So now what do we do?”

Di crossed her arms. “We go back there and get the last three.”

I nodded. “There’s no other option. We can’t leave them there. If they’re still being drugged, it’s only a matter of time before they die too.”

“God,” Jacinda whispered. “Can you imagine what they’re like now? From what I remember . . .” she paused, her eyes clouding. “Those rooms they kept us in. They were like prison cells. And the experiments that man did on us. Who was that?” She turned to Father.

“That was Marcus. Albert only experimented on his group.”

Jacinda shuddered. “He scared me so much. I know he terrified the other kids too, in the other groups. I heard a lot of them talking at night, crying a lot too.”

I bit my lip. “The man with the ugly, black cloud. I remember him, barely, but I do.”

Father’s head snapped up. “His cloud was black? I always wondered about that.” A haunted looked crossed his features. “Marcus could charm anyone, but there was a side of him few saw. I always questioned how pure his intentions were. A few times he . . .” Father cleared his throat, his eyes wide. I could only imagine the memories he was remembering. “Let’s just say I witnessed him doing things that hastened my desire to remove you.”

“So are these three still kept in the warehouse?” Jasper asked.

Father shook himself. “Yes, it’s the same place you all were kept. Diamond was right to study it.”

Amber glanced at Di. “How did you know about it?”

Di began pacing. “Father told me the night we arrived here. After you all went to bed, we talked late into the night so I could gain more information.”

I sat back. Flint put his arm around me. As usual, Di had taken charge, not letting the mere inconvenience of not having our memories stop her. She had a goal, and despite my medical issues, she’d spent the last four days working to achieve it. It was ironic in a way. Before Father erased our

memories, she and Flint had been the only ones content to stay living in hiding in the Forbidden Hills. But now, she was the driving force behind us confronting O'Brien Pharmaceuticals, freeing the other lost children, and gaining our freedom. Definitely ironic.

I bit my lip. If I could learn how to reliably use my newly remembered abilities, I could help free the ones still held captive. I could be a big help.

"Where's this warehouse located?" Flint asked.

"Just outside Chicago, in an industrial area," Father replied.

Flint's brow furrowed. "And who is this contact of yours?"

"An old friend I've relied on over the years. I can trust him."

Nobody said anything to that. It only highlighted how little we knew about Father's outside life. Father had never talked about his past, and the few times I'd asked him questions, he'd averted the subject, deterring my attention to something else.

In a way, Father had a life completely outside of us that we knew nothing about. I guessed that was for one of two reasons. Either he wanted to hide something from us, or he wanted to protect us from something. I'd bet my life it was the second.

"So that's where we start then," Di said. "We return to that underground facility and get them out."

Father frowned. "It won't be easy. It's guarded twenty-four hours a day and entry requires a retinal scan."

Mica perked up. "I may be able to help with that."

Father smiled. "That's right. You could. Have you been working on altering your sight again?"

"Yeah, I didn't know I could do it until I got my memories back."

I leaned forward. "We should probably spend some time working on our gifts. The more defensive and offensive powers we have, the better off we'll be."

"Not to mention, it would be wise to have firearms too. A bullet would come in handy if someone tried to kill us," Flint added.

Jet crossed his arm. "Or capture us. I don't know about the rest of you, but I don't want to go back to that place."

Jacinda's brow puckered. "It sounds like we still have work to do before we go."

Di's mouth set in a grim line. "If that's the case, we start first thing tomorrow morning."

Everyone agreed, all except Father. He sat back, a fearful gleam in his eyes.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Di woke everyone at six the next morning. We barely had time to dress with the five-minute warning. From there, she herded us outside. Several times, she actually nudged and prodded people to get them moving.

It was still dark and cold out. We all huddled in a big group, shivering. Only Flint seemed immune to the temperature.

“Come on.” Jet rubbed his hands together. “At least let us go back in and eat something first. I’m starving.”

Di shook her head. “The more tired, hungry and irritable you are the better. We have to prepare for the worst.”

Amber muffled a big yawn. “What do we need to prepare for that requires us being tired and hungry?”

“I want to see how you all do under stress,” Di replied.

I brushed hair out of my eyes and stuffed several strands under my hat. “Why isn’t Father here?”

Di put her gloves on. “He’s still sleeping. I didn’t want to wake him. Besides, we can’t always count on him. We need to find a way to work together without him always looking over our shoulders.”

I crossed my arms, shivering again. “Won’t he come with us when we return to O’Brien?”

“To Chicago, yes, but not when we rescue the other three.”

Amber gasped. “He’s not coming into the warehouse with us?”

Di gave her a sharp look. “Father isn’t young anymore. He’s not as strong or fast as the rest of us, despite the effects of our drugs. Who knows what we’ll be up against, and if we need to ensure that one of us always stays safe, it’s Father. Without him, we have no inside contacts and no resources other than what we have in our bank accounts from before.”

I swallowed uneasily. I hadn’t thought that far ahead, but Di was right. The only money we had to our names was from what Father gave us in April, to live off of when he took our memories away. That money still sat untouched in our bank accounts. Other than that, we didn’t have any

resources. Not to mention, we had no way of contacting his inside O'Brien contacts, no way of alerting his pilot for an emergency flight, and no way of knowing where Marcus was or what he was up to. Nothing.

What she said made sense. We needed Father to stay safe and alive. No matter what. And we also needed to learn more information from him. At the very least, a few of us should know how to contact his pilot.

"I guess you make a good point," Jasper mumbled.

I nodded. "I'll ask Father for some of that information when we finish out here."

"So now what?" Jacinda asked. Her long hair hung down her back, the top of her head stuffed under a wool hat.

"Now, we see what each of us can do, now that we have our entire memories." Di turned to Mica. "When we were younger, you were working on changing your eyes, not just enhancing your vision. Do you really think you'd be able to fake a retinal scan?"

"There's seriously no reason we can't do that inside, by the fire," Jet muttered.

Di ignored him as Mica stepped forward.

A down jacket puffed around Mica like a marshmallow. "I can try, but I'm not sure if I'll be able to. It would require a complete transformation of my genetic makeup."

"Try." Di crossed her arms. "From what I've seen in their security system, we need to pass a retinal scan to access several areas."

Mica rolled her eyes. "No pressure or anything."

Jet snorted. "Di, how is this going to work? It's not as if we have a retinal scan to practice on."

Mica's eyes narrowed. "Jet, come here."

The twin sauntered over, his dark curly hair ruffling in the early morning breeze. Mica stepped closer and glanced up at him. Her dark brown eyes stared into his blue ones. Sweat erupted on her brow. Closing her eyes tightly, she made a noise, as if in pain. At least a minute passed before she opened them.

I gasped.

Mica's brown eyes were now blue. Well, kind of. One of them was half blue and half brown, but the other was completely blue. She stared up at Jet, sweat pouring down her face. After a minute, she sank to the ground, breathing heavily.

Jasper rushed to her side. “Are you okay?”

“It’s so hard to do.”

I didn’t tell her she hadn’t completely pulled it off. Nobody else did either.

Jet crossed his arms. “What were you doing when you did that?”

“Mimicking *your* eye’s genetic makeup. I think.” From her uncertain tone, perhaps she was aware she hadn’t completely pulled it off. “Father helped me discover this ability about a year before the fire. It hurts so damned much every time I do it, though.”

“We’ll need that skill to get past security,” Di said. “You need to practice and hone it. We may need you to conjure someone’s eye makeup in a split second. Our lives may depend on it. Do you think you can do that?”

Mica stood shakily. “I’ll try.”

Di put her hands on her hips. “Who’s next? Jet? Jasper?”

The twins stepped forward.

Di raised her eyebrows. “What do you remember about your manipulative powers?”

The twins eyed one another. “We can alter thought patterns and affect people’s moods,” Jasper replied.

An image of Mica slapping Jasper flashed through my mind. She’d accused him of using his powers on her.

“Can you do it as strongly as before Conroy drugged us?” Flint asked.

“Only one way to find out.” Jasper stepped closer to Flint and stared at him. His face grew serious. Similar to Mica, sweat popped on his brow.

Flint stood beside me, staring at the twin. Ten seconds passed. Flint shuffled his feet. A few more seconds passed. He glanced over his shoulder. Then, his breath became shallow before he pulled me to him. His arms wrapped tightly around me, pressing my ear to his chest. His heartbeat reminded me of a jackhammer.

A moment later, Jasper took a step back, panting. He bent over and put his hands on his knees, his breaths audible.

A few more seconds passed before Flint shook his head. He looked down, seeming to only now realize he held me. “Wow, that was a strong one. I completely fell for it.”

“So it’s just as strong as before the drug.” Di grinned. She turned to Flint. “Tell me what you felt.”

“I . . .” Flint began. He shook his head. “I don’t know exactly. All I know is I felt fear. A sense that some kind of impending doom was upon me, that I needed to find someplace safe.”

Jasper nodded. “I put emotions and images in your mind, triggering the primitive areas of the brain.”

Di was still smiling. “Like a fight or flight response.”

“Exactly,” Jasper said. “Couldn’t have described it better myself. But we can make things positive too, remember? It’s not all negative.”

“I remember you doing that last year when you practiced on us. Jet, your turn,” Di demanded. “I want to know if it’s as strong.”

Jet snickered. “Any volunteers?”

I stepped forward. “You can use me.” It wouldn’t be the first time the twins had manipulated my emotions. At least this time, I was a willing participant.

Jet’s wide shoulders blocked the rising morning sun. For once, the cocky expression that usually adorned his face was gone. His expression became like Jasper’s. Serious. Sweaty. It was obviously hard work for the twins.

Similar to Flint, at first I didn’t notice anything unusual. I stood there, waiting for something to change.

When it finally did, it was subtle. I almost didn’t notice it at first despite the twins having done this to me dozens of times before. To describe it, I became . . . content. Flint still held me in his arms. I slumped into them, a smile spreading across my face, but it didn’t stop there. Out of nowhere, a bubble of laughter erupted from me. Before I knew it, I was laughing uncontrollably in absolute joy. I had no idea why. It was as though someone surprised me with a present I always wanted or told me some joyous news I’d been waiting to hear. I giggled and hugged Flint, practically singing it felt so amazing.

And then, it stopped.

“Oh!” I almost tipped over it ended so abruptly.

I shook my head, my eyes focusing on the circle of people around me. We still stood outside, at dawn, cold and hungry. Nothing happy about that. I blinked.

“*Oh* . . .” I felt more aware as my brain slowly returned to normal. That short-lived instant happiness was gone. I shook my head. “I’ll never get used to that.”

Jet grinned. “Good times, huh?”

I rolled my eyes.

Di’s mouth tightened. “All right, Lena. You’re up.”

Her abrupt order made me stiffen.

“Um, sure.” I stepped away from Flint and put a few feet between me and everyone else. I took a deep, unsteady breath and stared across the backyard. The rising sun brightened the pebbles and caused a hazy hue to erupt across the land. I smiled. So many plants. So many animals. So much untapped power just within my reach. Now, if only I could reliably harness all of that energy.

A brief image of my struggles yesterday flashed through my mind. I pushed the nervousness away.

“Come on, Lena,” Mica said. “You can do it.”

“Right.” I wiped my hands on my pants. An image of O’Brien’s men tackling and capturing us flashed through my mind. They pinned me to the ground while they hauled Flint away. My insides grew cold.

I can’t let that happen.

I switched my vision. Everyone’s clouds appeared. Like I’d predicted, all of us had pale green in our auras.

I concentrated on them. Breathing deeply, I tried to center myself as I watched the beautiful, colorful images. I imagined them growing and coming together. A few seconds ticked by.

Nothing happened.

I tried again, willing our auras to join. When they refused to budge, I turned my concentration to the small plants and animals. Concentrating harder, I willed those clouds to appear. One by one, they lit up: a wispy haze around a creosote, a bubble of white surrounding a passing insect. Sweat trickled past my ear. I stretched my reach farther. Clouds bubbled around every life force in the backyard.

My heart pounded. I breathed faster.

Groaning, I tried to join the clouds nearest me. Again, they didn’t budge. Another image of O’Brien hauling my family away flashed through my mind. The small aura around a cactus lifted. I almost slumped in relief but pulled myself up just before I lost control.

Knowing my family may depend on my ability caused anxiety to rise within me. I grabbed onto the aura around a beetle and joined it with the cactus. Keeping my sight focused on the joined clouds, I moved them as

one and brought them to Mica's cloud. *What if they take Mica? What if I never see her again?* With a mental push, I joined the three together.

A brief triumphant surge burst through me. *It worked!*

Breathing heavily, I carefully lifted Mica's cloud from her shoulders. This time it moved. Sweat poured from my face. It felt as if my heart would leap right out of my chest, but I kept my focus. My entire world became the energy of all living things within the area.

I closed my eyes and focused on that steady, subtle hum. I could feel them now. It was almost as if the electrons circling each nucleus, creating those infinitesimal fields of energy, called to me. They grew more and more alive the longer I focused.

My entire body trembled. The energy grew. I felt its power as I joined more clouds. I could feel them lifting from everyone's shoulders. A huge ball of energy that only I could feel formed in our midst. It crackled until it was a force that I could manipulate.

With a burst of sheer determination, I flung the power as hard as I could.

Someone screamed.

The power left me.

I snapped my eyes open. Amber lay on her back, ten feet away. My eyes widened.

Everyone rushed to her side.

"Are you okay?" Jacinda kneeled down.

Amber sat up, rubbing the back of her head, a dazed look on her face. "Yeah, I'm fine."

My mouth dropped. "Did I . . ." I swallowed. "Did I do that?"

Di glanced up from where she squatted at Amber's side. She grinned. "Yes. You did."

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

"But . . . how . . ." I shuffled guiltily at Amber's feet.

The others kept eyeing me, wide shock apparent on their faces, as if surprised as me by what I'd done.

"You haven't done that in four years!" Mica exclaimed.

Jet gripped Amber under her arms and hauled her up while Jacinda brushed Amber's pants off. "That was pretty wicked." Jet grinned.

I stuffed my hands in my pockets. "I'm sorry, Amber. Are you okay?"

She rubbed her head. "Yeah. I think so." Her pixie haircut was in disarray. Her hat sat a dozen feet away.

Di's eyes gleamed as she assessed Amber's head. "It was just like that power you conjured when you threw Jet off you during Capture the Flag."

"But . . . I haven't been able to come anywhere near that amount of power since then."

Di stopped inspecting Amber's head. "What did you do differently?"

"I . . . well . . ." I shook my head. "I don't know."

"You were trembling," Flint said. "And sweating. It was almost like you were in a trance."

"How long did it take me?"

"A few minutes," Mica said.

"That's way too long if I'm going to be of any use to us." My shoulders slumped. "We won't have that kind of time when we're hurrying through the warehouse."

Flint's energy pushed into me. "Let's not get ahead of ourselves. There's no reason you need to go in."

Di didn't seem to hear her brother's words. That excited gleam was back in her eyes. "You *need* to figure out how you did it. That's something you may need to do on a moment's notice if we get in trouble."

Flint's energy kicked up another notch. "Like I said, I think we're getting ahead of ourselves. We haven't decided who's going in and who's staying outside."

Another image of O’Brien hauling Flint away flashed through my mind. *If* I had the power to stop that from happening, I needed to help. Memories of the past four years surfaced, where I’d tried to replicate the power I’d conjured during Capture the Flag. I’d never been able to create that much power again . . . until now. *But how did you do it? And can you do it again?*

“I think I should practice more. Di may be right.”

Flint placed his hand on my back and leaned down. “I know you can do it. I’ve always known you have it in you, but I don’t think we need to rely on you to stop O’Brien’s men. We’ll get guns. You can always stay outside and guard the door.”

I met Flint’s gaze. “But I need to do my part in this. I can’t hide outside just because it’s safer.”

Flint’s brow furrowed. Rolling energy was his only reply.

“You need to keep working on it.” Di gave Flint a haughty glare. “Guns can jam. We can’t rely only on firearms. Practice, Lena. You’ll get better.”

Flint scowled at her while I wrapped my arms around myself. That’s what Father had said. Only thing, in the last four years despite how many times I’d tried, I’d only been able to do it twice.

DI TOLD EVERYONE to return to the house. She said we’d done enough for one session.

“What about you, Di?” I said as we stepped inside. “How reliably can you see the future?”

“I’ve been practicing. Don’t worry.”

Di’s additional power was her ability to control her visions. At times, she was able to foresee the future in a certain area or for a particular person. Not like the random visions that usually pummeled her. However, like all of our enhanced powers, it wasn’t reliable.

“So . . .” Jet chimed in. He closed the door behind us. It automatically locked. “Will you be able to see if we get into some deep stuff? Like if we make a wrong turn and start walking down a dark tunnel, would you know that at the end lurked a giant alien, ready to eat us for lunch?”

Mica rolled her eyes. “Back on the alien topic, I see.”

Di gave Jet an annoyed glare. “Something like that.”

I breathed a sigh of relief when we trudged upstairs and thoughts of breakfast lured everyone to the kitchen. I hung back in the stairwell, though, letting everyone pass. When they all disappeared, I stopped and leaned against the wall, wringing my hands. Despite wanting to do my part in this, I didn't know how much help I'd be.

Four years.

In four *years*, I'd only been able to conjure power worth using *twice*. And each time, I'd had no idea how I'd done it. That didn't make me a reliable asset. It made me a liability. I wanted to practice to get better, but that didn't mean it would do any good. *How can I possibly learn that kind of control in such a short amount of time?*

Sounds filtered down the stairwell—pans banging and the fridge opening in the kitchen as everyone chatted among themselves.

"Are you coming?" Flint appeared at the top of the stairwell. His chestnut hair was mussed as if he'd been running his hands through it. He frowned. "You look worried."

I stayed slumped against the wall. "That's an understatement."

He jogged down the steps until he stood at my side. "Want to talk about it?"

I sighed heavily. "I need to figure out how I harnessed all of that energy, and I'm not sure if I can."

"Hmm." I felt the conflicting emotions in his cloud. While he wanted me to learn more about my ability, since it meant so much to me, he didn't want me in harm's way.

I felt the pleading in my eyes when I glanced up. "What if I never learn how to control it? You saw how long it took me to do it out there. We could have been dead by then if it had been up to me to save us."

"Keep practicing. With time, you'll get better."

"But I've been practicing for four *years* and what do I have to show for it? Knocking around rocks, small kitchen items, maybe a book or two? I've only been able to form *two* powerful energy balls, and I have no idea how I did it. How can I possibly be ready?"

It all seemed so impossible. There was no way I could learn that much control in the little time we had. Amber's form laying dazed on the ground flashed in my mind. The last thing I wanted was my family sprawled in front of me while men from O'Brien came at us. If by some miracle I

actually learned how to form energy balls reliably, there was no guarantee I could learn to control them. I could just end up hurting those I loved.

Flint placed his hands on my shoulders. His dark eyes bore into mine. “We’ll have guns too.” He tugged me. “Now, come on. Let’s have breakfast.”

Delicious scents floated in the air when we finally entered the kitchen. Sausage sizzled in a pan while pancakes cooked on the stove.

Father appeared a moment later, freshly showered. “I see you’ve all been up for a while.”

Mica downed a glass of orange juice. “Di made us get up early.”

“I saw from the window. If I had known you were getting up, I would have joined you.”

Di ducked her head. “I didn’t want to wake you. We need to figure out how to work together without you.”

Father frowned. “Without me?”

She gripped his arm and pulled him from the kitchen.

I breathed a sigh of relief. I was glad I wasn’t the one to break it to Father that him joining us in the warehouse wasn’t a good idea.

Ten minutes later, they still hadn’t returned. The rest of us sat down for breakfast. No one said much, but a nervous, eager energy buzzed around the room, like a fly that couldn’t sit still. Several times, I switched my vision. Everyone’s clouds appeared. I forked food into my mouth and studied their auras. I concentrated in between bites, trying to make the clouds join again.

It didn’t go well. Most of the time I couldn’t move them at all.

IT WAS MID-MORNING when we returned to the backyard. Bright sunshine streamed down. A few vultures circled overhead. A falcon cry sounded in the distance. Gone were the towering aspens and scampering sounds of forest creatures. The dry, cool air and desert horizon had a completely different form of beauty.

Father was with us this time. From his grim expression, I guessed he didn’t like the thought of us venturing into the warehouse without him. However, I hadn’t heard arguing when he and Di discussed our viewpoint. Perhaps he accepted that above all else, we needed him safe.

“Show me what you remember,” Father said to Di, the twins, Mica and me.

Flint, Jacinda and Amber sat in the patio area to watch. A rather extravagant outdoor barbecue and bar area sat off to the right under a large pergola.

Mica stepped forward, offering to go first again.

Much the same happened as earlier. She closed her eyes, sweat popped on her brow, while her hands fisted at her sides. Exertion was apparent in every line of her body. After a few minutes, her eyes flashed open. They looked identical to Father's. Almost. She held it for longer this time. Maybe ten seconds, before she doubled over and gasped for breath.

"Good," Father said. "Try again. This time, I want you to concentrate on the individual cells in your irises. I know that sounds impossible, but I think . . ."

And so the morning went.

Father spent time with all of us, helping us hone our skills and remember the abilities we'd learned in the past years. It went better with him coaching us. I felt surer and more capable under his guidance. However, I quickly realized my success earlier in the morning was as I predicted—a complete fluke of good luck.

After a few attempts, I still wasn't able to form an energy ball. I was able to see clouds around the plants and animals easily—my entire four years of practice wasn't a complete waste. However, my continued efforts drained me. By the end of the day, it was only out of sheer determination, that I was able to form a small ball from three shrubs, but it wasn't strong or powerful. I also had little, if no, control over it. Forget about throwing it. All of my concentration required keeping the energy together.

Once again, success seemed impossible.

BY SUPPER TIME, I felt as if I'd run a marathon while being intermittently dragged by a truck. We'd never worked this intensely before. In the Forbidden Hills, Father would spend an hour with us here and there, when he had time outside of the lab. Never had we done ten hours straight of grueling practice. I was tired, sore and was pretty sure I'd pulled a muscle or two. It was bizarre. Everything I did was with my mind, yet my entire body felt the effects. Even my toes hurt. That was a first.

"I think we've done enough for today," Father said.

Di, Mica and the twins were in no better shape. Mica complained of a pounding headache while the twins said they could barely stand. Di insisted

she could keep going, but after Father's insistence, she quit too. If Father hadn't been there, I was pretty sure Di wouldn't have stopped until exhaustion rendered her unconscious.

Flint, Jacinda and Amber stood from their lounge chairs.

Di gave them an irritated glare. "Watching is hardly helping us. You'd all be more useful if you did research on O'Brien."

Flint raised an eyebrow. A steady push of energy rolled toward me. It was again filled with worry. I knew he didn't like the thought of me using my abilities to help in the warehouse, but I didn't have the energy to argue or push his energy back. I simply let it roll through me.

Flint crossed his arms. "It's just as important that we learn what you're all capable of. If we want to work as a team, we need to function as one. Once your control improves, we should do mock drills. Mimicking situations we may be in will prepare us for possible scenarios to come. It'll make us more effective at handling situations together when they arise."

Father nodded. "I was going to suggest the same thing."

"But in the meantime, how about you use your free hours to do more research on O'Brien," Di said.

"I can do that, but we also need guns." Flint gave Father an expectant look.

Father frowned heavily. "As much as I hate firearms, I think you're right. I can purchase handguns tomorrow."

THE NEXT DAY we split into teams: the research/firearm group and the practice group. Father purchased handguns for Jacinda, Amber and Flint. Of course, Flint took to the gun as if it were an extension of his own body. He watched a YouTube video on how to use it. Within the hour, he was hitting targets a hundred yards away. Considering his drug enhanced his physical abilities, I wasn't surprised. Hand, eye coordination was like breathing for Flint.

Jacinda and Amber weren't nearly as confident. At first, both were squeamish about using a firearm. However, Flint spent time with them until they knew how to safely load and use it. After each was able to handle the weapon without turning green, Flint left them to target shoot. Since Flint also had hacking skills, he spent most of his time continually trying to breach O'Brien's firewall.

Despite their growing confidence with guns, Jacinda and Amber both had more to offer than simply carrying a weapon. Jacinda was a natural with social skills. Her looks didn't hurt either. We all agreed she'd be the one to approach the first guard when we got to the warehouse. It was possible, although not likely, she'd be able to talk her way into the premises with help from the twins' manipulative powers. That would be preferable. If we could get in without violence, our chances of succeeding were higher.

Amber's small frame and flexibility could also come in handy, not to mention, her ability to smell emotions. If an O'Brien employee was honest, scared or deceitful, Amber would pick up on it. All useful skills in the right circumstances.

We spent the next week practicing and practicing. From sunup to sundown, Flint worked on the computer while Jacinda and Amber practiced shooting. The twins, Mica, Di and I practiced in the backyard going over and over our advanced abilities while Father coached us. Some days I did better than others. On three separate occasions, I was able to form huge energy balls. However, it was again out of sheer determination and took hours of practice before I was able to do it. A year ago, I would have been ecstatic at that progress. Now, it was too little too late.

Three energy balls.

Hardly reliable and hardly something to gloat over. With entering the warehouse looming over our heads, I needed to be able to make three energy balls a minute, not three in a week after hours and hours of practice.

It didn't help that with each passing day, I grew more hesitant. In a way, it was a head game. I hadn't been to the O'Brien warehouse since I was five years old, yet I remembered enough to know I never wanted to return. Part of me wanted to run and pretend that all of this was crazy, that men from a giant pharmaceutical company couldn't possibly be after us. But then I'd watch us in the backyard, observe our skills as the others slowly grew stronger and I'd realize that we *were* living proof of the illegal activities done by the company. Nothing about us was normal. We were loose ends—best snipped and discarded than left to unravel the entire cloth.

Deep down, I knew that as long as Project Renatus was up and running, we were still at risk. We'd never have a normal life until that threat was eliminated, and of course, there were the three other lost children.

We couldn't leave them.

ON WEDNESDAY MORNING, two and a half weeks since arriving in Arizona, I woke early even though it was still dark. I'm sure my aching muscles and cramped neck could be partly blamed for that. Practice yesterday had been particularly brutal. However, I'd been able to form a usable, fairly strong ball twice in an hour.

It was the best I'd ever done.

Flint's warm, sleeping form lay beside me. I snuggled closer to him, using his heat to soothe my aching muscles. He murmured something in his sleep. A heavy arm reached out and pulled me tightly to his side. I sighed in contentment, my eyes starting to close when suddenly, they flashed open.

Putting a hand on my lower abdomen, an excitement that had nothing to do with secret O'Brien sectors, experimental drugs or other lost children came over me. I eased out of Flint's arm and tiptoed to the bathroom. Once inside, I grinned when another bout of menstrual cramps seized me.

I didn't think I'd ever felt more excited to have my period. I cleaned up and then rummaged through the bathroom. I'd put the birth control Father gave me somewhere in here. I swore it was on the shelf by that scented candle.

I frowned when it wasn't there. *Where did I put it?*

After ten minutes of searching, cursing, pulling a few hairs out and more cursing, I finally found the tiny package under a towel I'd left on the bathroom floor. How it ended up on the floor, under a towel, I didn't know. Then again, I swore half the stuff I lost grew legs and walked off. Seriously, I could only be partly blamed for my uncanny ability to lose things.

I pulled out a small pill, the tinfoil wrap crinkling. With a pop in my mouth and a quick drink of tap water, it was down. I grinned.

Dawn light peeked through the curtains when I crept back into the bedroom. Flint still slept, his body prone, his beautiful back and shoulders bare. The sheet tangled around his waist, accentuating his lean hips. In the morning light, his golden skin glistened like smooth honey—warm, inviting, and delicious. The image he presented conjured images of Greek Gods on Mount Olympus, with their dark hair, beautiful features, and magnificent bodies wrapped in togas.

Easing under the covers, I crawled to his side before peppering his back with soft kisses.

After a while, he stirred.

I slipped a hand under the sheets, finding his firm, round backside. I continued to kiss his warm skin. A groan escaped him when my hand reached around to cup his front. His eyes slowly opened and he turned.

I quickly rearranged myself. We lay facing one another, my hand moving slowly and rhythmically over him. He closed his eyes and groaned again. It didn't take long until he found release. His body shuddered, his thighs tightening. When he finished, I propped myself up on an elbow beside him.

He smiled lazily, the early sun streaking off his chestnut hair. "Good morning."

"Did you enjoy your wake-up call?"

He chuckled. "Very much. Feel free to do that anytime."

He reached for me. I knew he wanted to return the favor, but I inched back, getting a raised eyebrow out of him. I traced a finger across his hard abdomen, a smile tugging on my lips. His muscles bunched and tensed in response.

"I have something to tell you," I said. "I got my period, and I just took my first pill."

His eyes opened wider. "Really? So that means . . ."

"Yep. In four days or so, things should be wrapping up down there."

"I have to wait four more days?"

I laughed at his expression. "I'd recommend it."

He had me pinned beneath him before I could take a breath, his arms locked around my waist, his lips sealing over mine. I was breathless by the time he pulled back. His response was to grind his hips more suggestively against me, which of course, only made it worse.

"Want me to help you with something?" he asked.

I bit my lip so I wouldn't nod. "No. In fact, I think for the next four days, no touching allowed."

Flint guffawed. "What?"

I locked my legs around his waist, meeting his grinds, causing a tight intake of breath from him. "Okay, maybe touching only, but nothing more."

"You do realize I probably won't last more than a few minutes the first time, right?" he warned. "What has it been now? Seven months?"

"Don't worry. With how I'm feeling, I won't either."

His eyes grew darker, his pupils dilating. "Damn, woman."

By the time we showered and joined everyone else upstairs, a heavy need had settled in my belly. Four days felt like a long ways away.

"OKAY," FLINT SAID. "Remember, even though this is a mock drill, use your powers to their full extent. We want this to be like the real thing."

We stood in the backyard, the night sky above, the moon shining down. Flint had a breakthrough during the afternoon. He'd been able to hack into O'Brien's system and find an original blueprint of the warehouse's interior, including where the guard stations and cameras were.

We had set up the backyard to mimic the O'Brien warehouse. It wasn't a perfect replica, not even close. In reality, the warehouse stood around forty feet tall with solid walls and a steel door entrance. We improvised on the wall. In other words, we imagined it. A straight line dragged through the pebbles by the twins' shoes indicated where the wall would be. The "inside" of the building was similar. We'd run strings from posts Father found in the garage to indicate hallways. The blueprint allowed us to measure the halls accurately and set up where the stations would be. We used Father's memory too. Overall, it wasn't a perfect setup to practice a real life situation, but it was the best we could manage. It would have to do.

"What if Lena chucks one of us over the wall?" Jet asked.

I rolled my eyes. "I doubt that'll happen."

Amber bit her lip, her large brown eyes worried. "But it could."

Flint grunted. I knew he hated that I was on the team that ventured into the warehouse, but despite his worry, I couldn't sit on the outside. I had an ability that could be useful. I wasn't sure if I should be pleased or worried that my family had such confidence in me.

We all wore black from head to toe, including ski masks. Nobody would be able to identify us. The only one not wearing a mask was Jacinda. We needed her smile and looks for our plan. The only downfall with what we'd worked out to get into O'Brien was that Jacinda wouldn't be disguised. We'd discussed her wearing a wig, but in the end, knew that wouldn't matter.

My abdomen tightened as another bout of menstrual cramps clenched my belly. I gritted my teeth and wished I'd taken some ibuprofen. I cocked my head as an idea came to me. *Perhaps I should use my agitation and irritation when I try to form a ball.* I'd never tried to summon other energies when I had so much energy of my own. *Maybe it will help.*

Di glanced at all of us. “Everyone remember the plan?”

Flint tensed. I held his hand as reassuringly as I could. I knew he worried for my safety, but I couldn’t let my family down. I needed to do my part whether he liked it or not.

“On my mark, three . . . two . . . one.” Di clicked the stopwatch. Despite this being our first mock drill, it was timed. Time could be our worst enemy. The faster we moved, the better.

Jacinda stepped forward while the rest of us stayed beside the house shrouded in darkness.

Father and Jasper played the security guards, standing stiffly, their eyes surveying the yard as if they were actually guarding something.

“Hey!” Father shouted. “This is private property. You’re trespassing!” His shout penetrated the quiet desert night. It sounded as though it carried for miles.

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Jacinda kept walking forward. “I was hoping you could help me.”

“No one’s allowed here, ma’am. You’ll have to leave,” Jasper replied.

I couldn’t see Jacinda’s face, but I knew she plastered on one of her supermodel smiles. Most men seemed to lose all coherent thought when she did that. Back at Hideaway Hills, it had been rather amusing to watch Jacinda wield her charm on the cowboys and guests.

Jacinda reached Father and Jasper and spoke quietly, distracting them as the rest of us moved into action.

Jet nudged Flint and Mica. “We’re up.”

Jet closed his eyes, channeling his powers at Jasper and Father. The twins had become more proficient at projecting their powers over distance, sometimes covering up to a hundred feet. Mica and Flint watched Jet, waiting for his nod. In the moonlight, beads of sweat appeared on Jet’s brow.

“Now,” he said tightly.

With a blur of movement, Flint took off, carrying Mica with him. When Flint moved like that, none of us, other than Mica, could see him. The next second, he appeared behind Father. Jacinda continued talking, but I’m not sure if Father or Jasper heard her. They both stood docile, smiles on their faces. Jet was definitely manipulating their emotions well.

I tuned into them. Their colorful clouds appeared while I worked to gather energy from every living thing in the area. I used my agitation and

frustration over my damned period first. Surprisingly, I felt my own energy grow.

In the distance, the energy spheres appeared around plants and animals, like bubbles in the night. I focused on my own energy more. Irritation over my damned period, longing for Flint, fear of O'Brien, love for my family. I used it all and slowly channeled my own power into a ball.

Closing my eyes, I concentrated as sweat popped on my brow. A smile tugged at my lips as my power became tangible. I gathered another aura and pulled it to mine. It joined. I could almost feel it, like throwing a ball or dribbling a basketball, the energy pulsed. Without a doubt, I knew I'd be able to throw the ball if need be. I snapped my eyes open and let the energy dispel.

I grinned. It was the easiest time I'd had yet at forming an energy ball. I'd have to remember what I learned. Harnessing my own energy first, gave me greater control over other fields.

Ever so slowly, Jacinda inched her way toward the pretend guard station. Flint sneaked up behind Father while Mica crept up behind Jasper. It was like watching a movie unfold in real life. I didn't realize I was holding my breath until Flint and Mica reached up, their arms closing around Father and Jasper while pressing rags against their mouths.

In this drill, we were practicing for the worst. In other words, Jacinda couldn't sweet-talk the guards and we all had to act swiftly and with whatever means necessary. The rags Flint and Mica held now were dry. In the real situation, they'd be soaked with chloroform. The guards would drop unconscious in seconds.

Jet's breath expelled in a whoosh as Jasper and Father pretended to fall to the ground.

"Nice job," Di whispered.

"Thanks." Jet panted.

I clapped him on the back.

"Ready?" Di asked as Jet slowly recovered.

"Yeah."

The four of us raced to where the others stood. Jacinda was busy stuffing her face and hair into a ski mask. Amber and Di stood guard, waiting to see if anyone else came to investigate. I focused on the energy and tried to form another ball while Mica and Flint got to work on the door.

According to Father, with Mica's ability to pass the retinal scan and Flint's hacking abilities, we should be able to get in.

Once we entered our mock warehouse, we continued on, stealthily inching our way to the elevators. According to Father, the elevators descended to the subterranean levels. Flint and Di didn't like the idea of using it to get down. An elevator could also be a cage. If something went wrong during the short ride down, it would be the perfect opportunity for O'Brien to capture us. However, there weren't any stairs. Father said it was a safety measure. Nobody could get in and nobody could get out undetected. In other words, we didn't have a choice. The twins again joked the warehouse didn't meet fire code.

Since we had no other options but to use the elevator, Father didn't want everyone in it. It was too big of a risk.

Because of that, we agreed that two of us would stay outside of the building, two would stay guarding the elevator at ground level and the rest would go down. That meant four of us would be in the underground levels. It was agreed that the most powerful were the twins, Flint, Di, Mica and me. As for which four would ultimately go down, that had yet to be decided.

We carried on well into the night, practicing our planned scenario again and again. In a way, when I wasn't stressing about forming reliable balls, it was fun and exhilarating, like playing Ghost in the Graveyard, or Capture the Flag at night, but that was only because no actual danger was present. In the real situation, I could very likely pee my pants.

The next few days were filled with practice and drills. I used my new discovery and harnessed my energy first before attempting to control others. With Father's help, I improved. I could usually form a ball within a minute or two if I concentrated on my own energy first. However, the balls varied in how powerful they were.

"We can't practice much longer," Di said after a particularly long session.

I panted beside her. "Why not?"

"December's just around the corner. The weather grows colder every day in Chicago. We need to get there and stake out the warehouse before the weather really turns. Can you imagine trying to observe the warehouse in a blizzard?"

I swallowed uneasily. The effects of weather hadn’t entered my mind. “I hadn’t considered that.”

She nodded grimly. “We’re going to have to leave within the week. Our time’s up.”

We used our remaining few days to practice. From sunup to sundown, we practiced and practiced and practiced. Each night I fell exhausted into bed. Flint did the same. Even though it lurked in the back of my mind that my period was coming to an end, I couldn’t summon the energy to feel excited about it. I was too damned tired.

On the day my period finally ended, Father gathered us in the living room, telling us he’d made his jet ready for the trip to Minnesota. We all agreed that we were as ready as we’d ever be. No amount of practice could guarantee success in real life.

I only wished I had more time. Forming energy balls at a moment’s notice was still hard for me, and I still couldn’t guarantee one every time despite my newly learned skill to harness my own energy first. I could only hope we were prepared enough for whatever was to come.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Puffy clouds skimmed the jet's wings as we descended into Minneapolis. My ears popped, and the coffee I'd had an hour ago left a bitter aftertaste in my mouth. Flint's hand rested on my thigh. It felt warm, comforting, safe.

Safe.

I always felt safe in Flint's presence. I wondered if that would still be the case at O'Brien, when we broke into the warehouse and anything could happen. It didn't help that worry hung heavily in Flint's cloud. He said he believed in me, yet with each passing second, the worry in his cloud grew.

I told myself it was only natural. Flint always worried for my safety, but I still wondered. Perhaps he questioned how safe I'd be because in reality, he doubted if I could defend myself.

The pilot came on the overhead speaker just as I began chewing my lip. "Please secure your seat belts. We'll be landing shortly."

Those of us that weren't already buckled did as instructed. Clicks flowed quietly through the cabin in that muffled way that sound travels through aircraft.

"Nervous?" Flint asked.

I straightened in my seat. "I'm okay. What about you?"

"I'm good." He stared straight ahead, his tone clipped.

We sat near the back of the plane. An entire row separated us from everyone else. His scent surrounded me. Spice, wood and tangerines. I leaned my head on his shoulder and inhaled deeply. My nerves automatically calmed. If only I could provide that kind of security for him.

We'd left the impenetrable fortress in Arizona earlier this morning. I had no idea if we'd ever return. Forever that home would be where we readied ourselves for O'Brien, where we became a family once again, and where my memories returned. It was hard to believe that living there for only three weeks could make me nostalgic for the place. I missed our real

home in the Forbidden Hills terribly, but that life seemed eons ago. Now, I had no idea what the future held.

My stomach grumbled loudly, reminding me I'd passed on breakfast. I'd been too nervous to eat. I kept thinking about all that could go wrong, or if we were lucky, all that could go right. Three people could be joining us in the near future, in a way, becoming part of our family. It was ironic considering we didn't know their names, if they were male or female or what special abilities they had. They were from Marcus' group, we knew that. Father said Marcus conducted the animal genetic group, but we had no idea what that meant since the program was still in its infancy when we left. For all we knew, the new three could be complete freaks of nature.

Thinking about them always made my stomach churn. Fifteen years. They'd been kept in subterranean levels and experimented on for fifteen *years*. Bringing them into our family could cause huge dynamic changes. I could only hope we'd be able to help them. But that was only if we succeeded in rescuing them.

The worry that hung most heavily on my mind, though, was that we still didn't have a plan to shut down Project Renatus. Father was hoping to gain more information from the new three. We were counting on them to help us understand how many people within the corporation were still involved. Even though Father had friends within O'Brien, he hadn't contacted them. He felt it was risky enough to reach out to his inside contacts. Reaching further would only bring more attention to him and potentially us. However, if the newcomers didn't have any answers, he'd have no choice but to call them.

It was yet another obstacle we'd have to overcome.

WE LANDED IN Minneapolis just after one in the afternoon. The late autumn breeze brushed long strands of hair in my face when the pilot opened the plane's door. The fresh air smelled good especially after hours in the aircraft.

Sunshine streamed all around. I shaded my eyes so I wouldn't trip on the stairs. Mica chatted excitedly while Flint's shadow hovered at my side. The rest of the group disembarked, everyone stretching now that we could stand fully upright.

A new, black GMC Yukon waited for us on the tarmac. The windows were so tinted they were black. The pilot handed Father the keys. "Your

vehicle, Conroy."

Everyone pulled their luggage from the cargo. The pilot helped. I studied him while he worked. Father had given me his contact information, in the event one of us needed to call him, but I still didn't know anything about him. Our pilot was tall, lean and wiry. Despite his trim, fit figure he didn't appear young. Creases lined his eyes, and his skin had a rough consistency that only came with age. I guessed him to be in his late forties, even fifties.

I had no idea how he knew Father or for how long. The two seemed to have a long standing friendship. They talked comfortably but half the time seemed to communicate things with only a nod or a brief glance.

I vaguely recalled him from my trip to Washington all those years ago. He'd been younger then, but he had still catered to Father's every request. I didn't know if he was the sole pilot Father used or if there were others.

"What's your name?" I asked him as he handed me a bag. His knuckles brushed mine when I took it.

A smile spread across his face. "Greg, and you're Lena, right?"

"That's right."

He handed me another bag which I gave to Jacinda. The damned Louis Vuitton. I practically dropped it, it was so big.

I slung my backpack over my shoulder and eyed him curiously. "How do you know Father?"

Greg sealed the cargo bay and glanced over his shoulder. Out of my peripheral vision, I saw Father nod.

"I met Conroy in my early twenties, right after my brother got out of Iraq."

I cocked my head. I knew everyone else was packing the luggage in the vehicle and getting ready to go, but that familiar buzz I got when meeting new people strummed through me. Besides, this was the first time I'd heard anything about Father's past.

"Did your brother work for him?"

Greg shook his head. "My brother, Brendan, was pretty messed up after the war. He'd lost an arm and tried to commit suicide twice. My mom reached out to a few charities. One of them was founded by Conroy."

For a moment, I didn't think he was going to continue, but then he said, "With Conroy's help, we got Brendan the help he needed. It didn't matter that it cost tens of thousands of dollars and years of therapy. Conroy

paid for it all. And then when my mom called him with an additional problem, he talked to her personally and listened to the entire story."

"What happened?"

Greg's jaw tightened. "My dad left her just as Brendan finally started getting better. She hadn't worked in years since all of her time was devoted to helping my brother, and with my dad gone," he made a sound of disgust, "she had nothing. That month, she couldn't make the rent."

"So Father, err Conroy, paid for it?"

"Yeah. He sent money monthly until she got back on her feet. I tried to help as much as I could, but I was in flight school and in debt up to my eyeballs with tuition. If it weren't for Conroy, she probably would have ended up on the street." He glanced at Father.

Father was in the driver's seat of the Yukon.

"I've never forgotten what Conroy did for my family," Greg said quietly. "He helped us when no one else would. It's because of him that my mom and brother are okay."

I swallowed thickly.

Greg cleared his throat and smiled. "So that's how I know him."

A door slammed. "Lena, yo!" Jet called. "Let's get a move on!"

Flint and Jet stood by the back of the Yukon. Everyone else was already in the vehicle. I shaded my eyes. "Are you going to wait here?"

Greg shook his head. "I'll fly back to Florida and wait to hear from Conroy. He'll let me know when and where I need to pick you up."

I wondered what else Greg knew about Father and us. He obviously knew we'd lived in hiding since he was the one who flew Father in and out of the Hills. I had no idea if his knowledge ended there or if he knew about Project Renatus and that Father had drugged us. For all I knew, Greg had been the one to help carry us from Montana to the cities we woke up in last April.

"Lena!" Jet yelled again.

"I better go," I said. "It was nice to officially meet you." I flashed him a smile before hurrying to the vehicle.

"About time." Jet opened the door and climbed inside.

Flint's chestnut hair whipped in the breeze. He cocked an eyebrow. "Did you make a new friend?"

"I think so."

Flint smiled. He looped his arm around my shoulders and propelled me to the door.

Someone had already configured the vehicle to seat nine. Jacinda's faint jasmine perfume hung in the cab. She sat in the front with Di. Amber sat in the back by herself and the twins and Mica sat in the middle. That meant Flint and I were going in the back with Amber.

"You guys better move so we can get in," I said.

Mica and the twins grumbled.

After everyone was situated, Father drove us away from the airport. I had no idea where we'd go from here. No doubt Father and Di had schemed something. My guess was either another secret house or a five-star hotel. It amazed me again that Father had lived with us for so long in the Forbidden Hills. Our lives there had been so simple. Luxury was non-existent. Now, it seemed wherever we went, we were treated like royalty.

I glanced out the window. Greg was taxiing the jet back to the runway. The jet gleamed in the sunlight.

Everywhere we'd gone since Father moved us from the Forbidden Hills had been in luxury and style: private jets, new vehicles, bulletproof houses. I couldn't imagine growing up like that. It was completely opposite from our humble beginnings in the hidden cabin.

Money, in a way, could be very isolating. Because of it, we'd never run through a busy terminal or stand in line at a restaurant, striking up small talk with strangers while lamenting the long wait. But then again, I'd never done that in my other life either.

In a way, we'd never been normal. I cupped my chin in my hand as I once again became lost in daydreams. It felt as if I'd spent most of my childhood dreaming of what could be.

Father pulled onto the interstate. Planes roared above. Huge passenger jets depicting Delta's logo flew in from all angles.

Father weaved the Yukon in and out of lanes, passing cars as needed until we got on the right road. I guessed it wasn't a coincidence that the windows were darkly tinted. Traveling this close to other vehicles, our faces could easily be seen. As always, Father considered all safety issues.

"Where are we going?" Amber's voice sounded so small in the large cab.

Father glanced at her in the rearview mirror. "We'll drive to Wisconsin and stop for the night. Tomorrow, we'll carry on to Chicago."

“How long of a drive?” Jet asked.

Father switched lanes again. “About four hours today, another three tomorrow.”

Mica made an exasperated sound. “That long? I hope we stop for supper before then.”

My stomach grumbled too.

Father frowned. “I’d prefer we get out of the metro area, then we may stop whenever you like.”

“Good,” Mica said tartly.

Since Mica sat in the middle with the twins—Flint, Amber and I had a perfectly unobstructed view of the three. Jasper put his arm around Mica’s shoulders, almost brushing me in the process. Amber emitted a small sound. I put my arm around her and gave her a half hug.

Amber’s large luminous gaze met mine. With a small smile, she leaned her head against my shoulder. I kept my arm around her until she closed her eyes. A few minutes later, her breathing became deep and even.

We stopped an hour later. I had to nudge her awake. I again wondered how well she was doing. Amber slept like the dead on my shoulder, making me think she might not be sleeping much at night.

“Are we there?” she asked in a small voice.

“Nope, just stopping for food.”

Father pulled into a fast food drive-thru. According to Father, it wasn’t safe to go into a restaurant as a large group, not with how close we were to Chicago. A few weeks ago, I would have sighed, and Flint would have rolled his eyes. Now, neither of us was quite so sure about Father being paranoid.

Flint had learned enough through his hacking to know that Project Renatus was real and alive, and I’d learned enough about our abilities to know that we *did* pose a threat to the project’s covert nature. None of us were normal humans, not even close—we were all a liability. It was a good reason to want us dead. Perhaps Father wasn’t paranoid after all.

A breeze blew in through Father’s open window when he ordered. The temperature had cooled since we landed. The smell of humidity hung in the air. Gray clouds filled the horizon, promising rain or snow in the not too distant future.

“Everyone keep your heads down or averted,” Father said when he pulled closer to the window.

Nobody argued.

A general feeling of anxiety strummed in the group. The feel of it coated my skin like oily grime that wouldn’t wash free. The closer we got to Chicago, the more real everything was becoming. Tomorrow, or perhaps the next day, we’d return to O’Brien.

Who knew what that day would bring.

CHAPTER TWENTY

We stopped for the night in Madison. Our hotel sat nestled on the lakefront of Lake Mendota, not far from the university campus. The capital glowed in the distance, beckoning anyone near to admire its architecture. When we stepped out of the car, groups of college students walked by. Sweatshirts sporting pictures of the UW's badger mascot were worn by a few. I watched them enviously as tidbits of conversation carried my way.

"Liz is going down to the coffee house at nine tonight. Want to meet her?"

"I got that freakin' biology exam tomorrow. I'm so not ready, dude."

I soaked up the conversations like a dry, eager sponge. These people were my age. In another lifetime, we could have been classmates. I wondered if that's what my life would have been like if I'd gone to college. Perhaps tonight I'd be hanging out with friends, carrying a bag full of books while pulling my hooded sweatshirt over my curls, my college logo proudly displayed on my chest.

A twinge of envy for something that could never be filled me. A normal life like that would never be mine. Tomorrow I'd be in Chicago, casing out a warehouse which held three people captive. A biology exam was the furthest thing from my reality.

Father had us split into three groups before we entered the hotel. Again, he didn't feel it was safe for all nine of us to appear in public together. Father checked us in while the rest of us waited in different locations.

He returned with sets of room keys and held them out. "Two to each room."

Flint took a key which caused Jet to smirk. "Let me guess. You two are sharing a room?" He waggled his eyebrows.

I rolled my eyes at him, but it was a welcome change to the melancholy I'd been feeling since we drove through campus. *That*, however, had been a welcome change from how I'd been feeling all day.

While my anticipation for tomorrow at times felt overwhelming, one thing trumped it. Tonight, Flint and I would be alone, in a private room, and I was on birth control.

That only meant one thing, and it had been so long since we'd last done *that*.

FLINT FLICKED THE light on when we opened our hotel room door. A soft glow bathed the room. Our reflections stared back at us in the large windows facing the lake. I walked farther into the room. A king-sized bed waited in the middle, as if inviting us to hop in the second we stepped inside.

Ignoring the bed, I hurried to the window and let my bag fall to the floor. Stopping just short of the glass, I stared at the lake and wrapped my arms around myself. Now that we were here, goosebumps sprouted along my arms and a shiver ran down my spine. It was stupid. Flint and I had been together for years. We'd had sex more times than I could count. *So why do I feel so nervous?*

Flint's arms encircled me from behind.

"Are you okay?" He whispered the words softly into my ear before pushing my hair back and nuzzling my neck. The feel of his soft lips sent a new shiver through me that was for an entirely different reason.

"Yeah. I'm fine," I managed when he moved upward to do delicious things to my ear.

"You sure?"

I closed my eyes as his hands roamed over my stomach, hips and thighs. I tilted my head up so his lips could take mine. He kissed me deeply, his scent surrounding me. I turned to face him and wrapped my arms around his neck.

He growled, pulling me closer.

We kissed for I don't know how long. All earlier nervousness or envy for a life I'd never had disappeared. My world became entirely and completely filled with Flint. His hands traveled over my back, pulling me tightly to him as his energy grew. I felt his energy mix with mine, causing a heady scent and pulsating power in the room.

"I've been waiting for this night for a long time." He pulled back. "Ever since meeting you for the second time in Pete and Val's entryway, I've wanted you."

His dark eyes swam with need and love. I tenderly reached up and pushed a lock of hair from his forehead. “Me too.”

He lifted me so quickly it took my breath away. Before I knew what was happening, my legs were locked around his waist and I was on the bed, his weight pushing me into the mattress. The familiar feel of him created an ache between my thighs.

“I want you,” I whispered.

Flint didn’t reply, his actions said everything. One minute, I was fully clothed beneath him, the next, my shirt was peeled off and my jeans were shimmied down and kicked off the bed. Flint did the same and then all I saw and felt was his smooth tanned skin.

The sheets felt soft and cool underneath. He hovered above me.

“God, you’re beautiful,” he whispered. Love and desire mixed in his gaze.

I ran a finger along his chest. He sucked in a breath.

“I love you,” I whispered.

“I love you too.”

He descended again. His lips found mine and everything that followed happened in a flurry of need.

My vision switched on its own as Flint and I made love. Our clouds intermingled, a beautiful array of bright green, blue, orange and pale green. With each second, the size of our clouds grew. My own energy built inside of me. I grabbed onto it. The feel of it made my control grow. Within a second, I had a huge swirling ball of energy hanging in our midst.

Triumph made me smile. *I was right. This is how I create the balls. I have to harness my own energy first.*

Flint’s shout when he came caused me to tip over the edge. Wave after wave of pleasure rolled through me. It mixed with my heady, triumphant victory as I became more in tune with my ability.

Afterward, we clung to one another. Flint lay sleepily, cradling me in his arms, yet I couldn’t sit still.

“You seem rather energetic,” Flint said lazily.

I pushed up on my elbow. “I’m getting better at forming energy balls.” I explained how things had improved over the past few days and how just now it had happened so easily.

Flint blinked. “You’re saying it was your own power, coming from inside you that did it just now.”

“Yes. I only realized this recently, that harnessing my own energy before trying to harness others can increase my control. Now, I *know* I must harness the energy swirling *inside of me* first. That I need to dig deep and pull on my own reserves if I want to form complete and tangible balls that I can manipulate.”

Flint tilted my chin toward him. A relieved gleam filled his eyes. “So you think you can form and control them more easily now?”

“I think so. It’s like something finally . . . clicked.”

He smiled sadly. “So you’re not willing to stay outside of the warehouse.”

I laid my hand on his chest. “I’m going in, Flint. I know you don’t want me too, but I can take care of myself. If I can control my ability, I’m the strongest in our group.”

THE MORNING CAME faster than I wanted it to. The entire night, Flint held me tightly as if terrified that day had come. The day he always dreaded—where he lost me once and for all.

It was a definite possibility that a week from now our family may be broken, shattered, never to be whole again. More than anything, we wished for a victory in which we all emerged—together and safe—but there was no way to guarantee that.

I knew Flint was scared. He didn’t want me going in. He wanted me outside, safe and secure, but I couldn’t let my family confront O’Brien while I hung back, not putting myself at risk.

Before and after we made love in the morning, I created more energy balls and each time they formed readily when I harnessed the growing energy inside of me first. It all made sense now and explained why I’d been able to throw Jet off me during Capture the Flag. During that game I’d been so worried, so aggravated over Jet not moving and Flint walking away. I’d been sure that it was the death of Flint and my potentially being together. That anxiety and bone-deep despair inside of me had been why the ball had formed so easily.

I couldn’t believe I hadn’t put two and two together before. For years, I’d been working on and off with Father, trying to replicate the sheer power I knew I was capable of. But I’d never come close. We’d been doing it all wrong. Both of us had thought the power was outside of me, coming from other living things, and it was . . . but I couldn’t control that power until I

controlled my own first. It was as though my soul was my anchor. Without something to tether all of that power too, it simply was too great to bear and it broke apart.

Morning sun cascaded into the room as Flint and I held one another. We lay in bed, my hair in tangles over his chest, our gazes staring out the window.

He threaded his fingers through my hair. “If we come out of this alive, I’m taking you away for that week in a hotel.”

“Make it a month.”

He chuckled but it was a forced sound. Worry lined his cloud.

I pushed up on an elbow and met his tortured gaze. “I’m finally getting the hang of my ability. I’ll be okay.”

He leaned forward and kissed me softly on the mouth. I felt his anxiety, love and fear. “I love you.” His voice caught.

The declaration made my breath stop. Sometimes, he took me completely by surprise. One minute, he was hard, tough, a rock for me to lean on, and the next, he was tender and vulnerable. I knew he was terrified of losing me, but he didn’t try to hide it. With me, Flint’s walls dropped. Alone like this, it was just me and him, our souls naked to one another, our bodies bare for the other to see. All worries, faults and desires on display to the other, knowing that no matter what, we’d accept each other as we were —strong or weak, we were committed to one another until the end.

He kissed me tenderly as the morning sun streamed over us. We held each other until my phone rang. I glanced at the screen. “It’s Di.”

Flint reluctantly sat up. “We better get up. I’m sure everyone else is already downstairs.”

I answered the call and told her we’d be down shortly. Flint and I took a quick shower together. When we finally dressed, he entwined his hand through mine.

“Come with me to the window.”

He pulled me gently to the huge glass panes. We locked our arms around one another as our heads tilted to the side to admire the view. The lake shimmered in the morning sun. Waves lapped gently below.

“I want to remember this always,” he said.

A lump formed in my throat. Love so strong I thought I’d burst pulsed inside of me. “I love you more than life itself,” I whispered.

He tilted my chin up. “You’re everything to me, Lena. Always have been, always will be.”

I reached up. The bracelet he’d given me three years ago slid down my arm and glinted in the morning sun. *Love You Forever*. I remembered how much those words had meant to me, how they’d kept me going during all of those months when I’d been homeless. Even then, my soul had known I needed to find him.

We packed the car and were on the road shortly after breakfast. The promise of Chicago and an unknown future loomed. I clasped Flint’s hand tightly, the bracelet brushing my skin as the interstate passed underneath mile after mile.

Traffic congestion grew the closer we got to Chicago. Father’s hands seemed to tense more and more around the steering wheel with each mile. Jacinda and Di sat beside him, their calm presence and inner strength fueling my own, inner purpose.

Now that I knew how to better control my ability, a fierce determination bloomed inside of me. We’d come here to do a job, and I’d be damned if we failed.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

That afternoon we checked into a motel on the outskirts of Chicago. It hovered off the interstate, an old, easily forgotten building that saw people in and out of its walls on a daily basis. To the check-in clerk, we were just another group of travelers, easily forgotten and practically unseen.

It was part of the reason Father had chosen this place. It was the exact opposite of every other accommodation we'd stayed at. Gone were the valets, room attendants and designer boutiques in the lobby. Here, if you wanted ice, you left your room to get it. Or, if you wanted to watch a movie and it wasn't on cable, you were out of luck.

Nobody remembered you here. It was a motel of empty souls and nameless faces.

I didn't mind the simpler, somewhat grimy, accommodation. The scratchy sheets and worn carpet didn't bother me either. Compared to my homeless life only months ago, this motel was a palace.

After a supper of takeout pizza, we all met in Di and Jacinda's room to talk about our plan for the night. It was agreed we'd stake out the warehouse and learn the routines. Once we felt confident in how it was run, then we'd act. Whether that be in a few days or a week, we hadn't decided.

Father sat on a chair in the corner of the drab room. His hands were clasped and his eyebrows drawn together. Less than thirty miles away waited O'Brien Pharmaceuticals' labs and corporate offices. A haunted expression glazed his eyes. I figured he never anticipated ever being in the situation we were currently in.

Di pulled up an aerial map on her computer. She turned the screen so all of us could see.

I stood and paced. Keeping my eyesight altered, I continually gathered and dispersed everyone's clouds. Each time, I grew faster and faster. *Breathe in, well up the energy inside you, feel the pulsing and growing in your cloud, now pull it from your shoulders and join it with the others.* Each time, it worked.

I grinned as my sense of power and purpose grew.

“As you all know, this is the warehouse.” Di passed around the map. I finally sat with the others. “We’ll be observing only tonight. Until I feel comfortable with how this facility is run, we won’t be acting. Got it?”

Everyone nodded.

“Jasper and Jet,” Di continued. “I want you two split up. One of you will be on the building west of the warehouse, the other on the building east. It’ll make communicating easier if our equipment fails. Lena, you’re with Jasper. Mica, you’re with Jet.”

Mica made a sound of protest. Di gave her a firm look and all complaining vanished. Di was in charge. That was decided on day one. We all had to do as she said. Multiple leaders wouldn’t work if it came down to following orders quickly.

“Sorry.” Mica ducked her head. “Yeah, that’s fine.”

Di eyed her brother. “Flint, you and I will be at ground level on the lookout. Amber and Jacinda, I want you waiting in the van watching the local streets and highways.”

Flint’s hand tightened over mine. Neither of us wanted to be split up, but right now, that didn’t matter. What mattered was following our plan and getting the three captives out.

We’d bought a large van that afternoon. The van was only a couple of years old but already had a few rust stains. It was plain, unmarked and in no way drew attention. However, it had large doors that were easy to jump in and out of, and the exterior paint was dark. It would draw little attention at night.

“Everyone bring your dark clothes,” Di said. “We meet in the parking lot in ten minutes.”

One by one, we left the room.

The sun had set and darkness grew steadily around. Lights from downtown made the clouds above gray while noise from the interstate followed us. Cold air filled my lungs. The rooms in the motel could only be accessed from the outside.

Flint followed silently behind me. His energy pulsed into my back. I welcomed its heat. Since it already neared the end of November, it was only a matter of time until it reached well below freezing each night. Hopefully, we’d be out of Chicago before that happened. Doing stake outs in winter would not be easy.

Our plan for the night was nothing new. For the past two weeks we'd hashed out what we'd do the first night in Chicago, but in a way, it still felt unpracticed. This was the real thing after all. True, we were only observing right now but still. A guard could spot us, or Marcus could show up and discover our plan.

I shivered when Flint and I grabbed our things and stepped back outside. We slung our packs over our shoulders. We'd change in the van on the way. As inconspicuous as this hotel was, it would still probably look suspicious if eight individuals, all dressed in black, jumped into a van and skidded away.

"Cold?" he asked.

I shook my head. "Nervous."

His mouth turned down as his eyes filled with worry. "Do exactly as Di instructs."

"I will. You better too."

We walked to the parking lot and hopped in the van. Father wasn't with us. He'd wait and stay safe in the hotel room. I could only imagine the worry he felt.

WE STOPPED THREE blocks from the warehouse and idled on the side of the road. There were no seats in the back of the van so we all sat on the floor. Peering out the large, tinted windows—the dark empty street stared back. In this section of the city, everything was industrial. The absence of shops, apartments, restaurants and rail stations meant little to no foot traffic. A few, empty cars lined the street, but that was it. The random streetlight did little to illuminate anything beneath it.

"Do you have your earpieces in place?" Di asked.

Everyone checked their communication equipment. We all did tests with one another to confirm that everything worked.

"We meet back here at 0300," Di said. "Do you all remember which routes to take?"

Everyone muttered replies.

I met Flint's gaze as Jet reached for the door handle. Worry hung heavily in Flint's cloud. He grabbed me, pulling me tightly to his chest. He planted a quick kiss on me before whispering in my ear, "I love you. Stay safe."

I hugged him tightly, cherishing his strong arms and unique scent.

The door opened. Cold air swirled into the van. Darkness shrouded the twins, Mica and me when we stepped out. Dressed all in black, we blended into the night.

“Be careful,” Di hissed. In the quiet street, her words carried.

The four of us secured our backpacks and turned. We took off in two separate groups. Mica and Jet disappeared down an alley. Jasper and I walked down the empty street, our shoulders hunched. We walked side by side, our movements quiet except for the light tapping from our shoes.

Di pulled the van away from the curb and with a rev of the engine, they disappeared. The last thing I saw were red taillights as they swerved around the corner.

I knew Di would circle back and park a block away. From there, she and Flint would slink to their hiding area, an area concealed in shadows just shy of the cameras.

As for Jacinda and Amber, they would stay in the van. They’d lookout for any approaching vehicles using their enhanced senses.

A block later, Jasper and I turned into an alleyway. Foul smells greeted us. Rotting garbage, putrid puddles of rain water and a few chemical scents I couldn’t identify wafted in the air. A squeal of rodents and pattering feet made me jump.

Jasper chuckled, but I could tell he was on edge too.

“Afraid of a little mouse, L?”

“More like cat-sized sewer rats from the sounds of it.”

“Don’t get bit,” he teased. “You’d need to get treated for rabies.”

I muffled a laugh, glad for the distraction as we wound our way around the large buildings. A barely visible waxing crescent moon shone above, illuminating little to nothing. I switched my vision which allowed me to see better by using our clouds. I took the lead after the pitiful street light disappeared.

“This way.” I reached our first turn. We still had three more turns before we’d get to the building that we’d climb.

Di had found the building we’d climb on a search of the area using satellite photos. An old pipe ran up one side of the building, and along with the decorative metal ledges fixed on its sides, it made as good a place as any to get to the top.

Part of our training in Arizona had been scaling walls. Considering we’d grown up in the Rockies, and had occasionally climbed rock faces for

entertainment, we were all good climbers. However, one misstep here and it was all over.

Jasper followed me quietly, our footsteps almost silent. Every ten yards or so, Jasper would give me an update on Jet and Mica.

“They’re two blocks away,” he said when we rounded our last turn.

My foot splashed in a puddle. Another squeal sounded from behind a large trash bin. I scouted for the pipe and ledges. “It’s up ahead, about fifty feet.”

Jasper grunted, his footsteps picking up. When we reached the pipe, I gazed up the impressive forty-foot, vertical distance, and tightened the backpack around me. Jasper did the same. Each of us wore special gloves, specifically made to fit our hands like a second skin while offering a superior grip to metal and wet surfaces. When climbing, I liked the feel of rock underneath my fingertips, but this was different. It had rained in the past day, and the ledges were filled with icy cold water. A slippery grip wouldn’t help either of us and could potentially prove fatal.

“Ready?” I asked.

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

I went first, grabbing onto the cool pipe while shimmying my feet up with each step. Lessons we’d learned through trial and error from our rock climbing adventures made the climb relatively easy. *If you get stuck, move your feet up. Keep your weight over your legs. Keep your arms straight when possible.*

All of that helped from tiring too quickly.

We climbed silently. It was relatively easy, in a way, no different from climbing a ladder although I had to search every now and then for where to put my feet. The only tricky part was holding onto the decorative ledges slick with frozen puddles from the daytime rain shower. Luckily, the gloves helped. When my hands reached the top, I gripped it tightly, high-stepped onto a ledge, and with a pull and push was on the rooftop. Jasper climbed the last few feet and jumped beside me.

He rolled his shoulders. “Nice job. You always were the fastest climber.”

“You kept up.”

He shrugged but I still caught his smile.

We both looked over the edge. A dark line signified the alley below. Getting down would hopefully be easier than going up, although down-

climbing wasn't always easy. I hoped it would go smoothly.

"Where are Mica and Jet?"

Jasper closed his eyes. The moonlight illuminated his firm mouth. "Just got to the top," he said a moment later. "They're getting in place."

"Good, let's move."

We slunk along the rooftop. Thankfully, it was mostly flat, except for the few areas it dipped for water runoff. A small ledge lined the perimeter. The closer we got to the edge that overlooked O'Brien, the flatter we became. At the last few yards, we crawled on our bellies, in case the guards noticed movement above.

At the edge, we took off our packs and retrieved the equipment inside. Jasper checked in with Di and Flint through the communication system. They were on the ground, northeast of the warehouse, close to a parking lot.

"Any movement?" I asked.

Di's voice was clear through the communication system. "None yet."

"Do you see anything?" Flint asked.

My breath sucked in at the sound of his voice. "No."

"Did the climb go okay?" he asked.

Jasper responded for me. "Lena's part cat."

Flint chuckled.

Di checked in with everyone else. Amber and Jacinda hadn't sensed anything suspicious. Mica and Jet lay on their bellies on the rooftop opposite of us on the other side of O'Brien. I brought the night vision binoculars to my eyes. Jasper did the same.

The guards came clearly into focus.

There were only two of them, thankfully. However, both carried guns and walked in a way that screamed a military background. Only one entrance let people in, although the loading dock was another option for entry. However, according to Father, it would be harder to access the elevator if we didn't go in the main door.

Di had equipment that allowed her to hear the guard's conversation, even though she and Flint were a hundred feet away. The rest of us watched and listened for other sounds. I knew Jacinda had her hearing turned to full volume despite being blocks away. If anyone drove anywhere near our direction, she'd alert us.

THE NIGHT PASSED relatively quickly, considering we only watched and listened. The only thing that bothered me was the cold. Laying on a roof at night in November, where the temps hovered around forty, wasn't exactly cozy. My toes felt frozen and the cold seeped through my jeans, numbing my thighs. I'd have to remember to wear more layers tomorrow.

Twice, trucks came to the warehouse. The guard's approached them each time, yet it seemed to only be delivery runs. They flagged the trucks back to the loading dock and several large boxes and containers were dropped off before the trucks left. I had no idea what those boxes held. Perhaps food for the captives, newly concocted drugs, supplies for the lab. Whatever the case, I doubted it was anything less than nefarious.

Di and Flint noted the times, the number of drivers and the license plates. Tomorrow, we'd investigate that more.

At 2300, there was a shift change. The evening guards left and the night guards came on. We paid particular attention to how that process worked. The guards' clouds were especially interesting. Almost all of the guards had gray clouds, but one of the night guard's shone white. From the conversation Di heard, it sounded as though he was fairly new. A part of me wondered if we could use that to our advantage when we finally breached the warehouse. It was another thing we'd have to discuss.

While we waited on the rooftop, I practiced drawing my energy balls. Between the six of us surrounding the warehouse, the guards, multiple rodents and alley cats within the vicinity, there was plenty of energy. Now, it was a matter of drawing it from all of the distances and forming it into one usable sphere.

It wasn't as easy in the night. Being cold and tired made it harder to concentrate, but I continually practiced my newly learned skill of drawing up my own energy deep inside of me. Twice, I was able to form a large ball, the energy practically crackling in its force. To me at least. Jasper was completely oblivious. Each time, when I knew I could throw the ball if I wanted, I asked if he sensed anything. Both times he said no.

Everyone else practiced their skills too. Jet and Jasper manipulated the guards, seeing how their behavior would change when their emotions were affected. A few times, we heard laughter and I caught a few smiles through the binoculars. I knew the twins were channeling positive, relaxing feelings. I only hoped the guards wouldn't be aware of the outside influence.

At 0230, we slunk back to the edge of the roof and began our climb down. I gripped the pipe tightly and stepped over the edge. The climb down wasn't as easy as I'd hoped. We were about halfway down when I placed my foot on an icy ledge and put my weight on it.

My foot slipped.

For a brief second, my foot hung in midair as my hands clung to the pipe. I frantically pedaled until I found another ledge to set it on. Adrenaline pumped through me. My heart pounded. Any feelings of being tired vanished.

"Lena? Are you okay?" Jasper had stopped above me. I felt his cloud, heavy with fear descend.

Taking deep, gulping breaths, I clung to the pipe until my energy calmed down.

"Are you okay?" Jasper whispered.

He hovered above, only a few feet separating us. If he slipped and fell, chances were he'd take me down with him. I didn't want to think about our broken bodies laying in a heap on the concrete alley below.

"Yeah. I'm fine. We're almost there." Carefully lowering my foot, I made sure it was firmly planted before I moved my hands down. Moving silently and carefully, I reached the bottom and hopped off the pipe.

Jasper joined me a moment later. His feet landed quietly in a puddle that was icing over.

He raised his arm in a high five. "Nice job."

I slapped his hand, still trembling from my near fall. "Let's hope we're not doing this every night for the next month."

"Lena, Jasper?" Di's voice came on over the ear pieces. "Are you two down?"

"Affirmative." Jasper grinned and nudged me. "I've always wanted to say that."

"Hurry up," Di said. "Jacinda heard vehicles moving this way. I want us out of here. *Now*."

We crept quickly back the way we'd come. I switched my vision so I'd spot any rats in the alleyway. The small clouds that puffed up around them disappeared when they scurried behind dumpsters.

Jacinda and Amber waited in the van. I could tell both were anxious from their wild looks and flushed cheeks. In a way, they had the hardest job. All they did was wait. I didn't envy them.

“The vehicles are two blocks away,” Jacinda said.

A few moments after Jasper and I got in the van, Flint, Di, Mica and Jet appeared. They all jumped in, and we slammed the door. Jacinda put the van into drive and slammed down on the gas pedal. She hit the curb. I glanced at her tight white knuckles and held out my arms to steady myself when the van swayed dangerously. Perhaps we needed to rethink our getaway driver.

“Where are they?” Di asked tightly.

Jacinda eyed the van’s side mirror. “Turning the corner now.”

We approached the end of the block just as an O’Brien SUV turned onto the street.

Jet watched through the back window. “Who do you suppose that is?”

“More guards?” Mica offered.

“Marcus?” Amber practically squeaked.

Di’s eyes narrowed as Jacinda swerved onto the interstate. She almost hit a sign before Di yanked the steering wheel straight. When we were a few miles away from the warehouse, the anxiety in the van finally relaxed.

Di turned in her seat. “Well done, everyone.” Cold night air trailed in through her cracked window.

All of us grinned. An excited energy buzzed in the air.

Di took her ski mask off. Her short dark hair fell around her oval shaped face. “We’ll research the guards and trucks more tomorrow, and tomorrow night, we’ll come back and watch again.”

Flint pulled me closely to his side as the van jostled and dipped along the highway. His heat felt good since my toes were still frozen. We huddled together on the van’s floor. His scent surrounded me, and nervous yet exhilarating energy pulsed everywhere. I had no idea it would be such an adrenaline rush to stake out a warehouse, but from the gleaming excitement in everyone’s eyes and staccato chatter, I could tell I wasn’t the only one feeling this way.

“You continue to amaze me.” Flint leaned down to nuzzle my neck.

A surge of desire shot through me. I didn’t know if it was Flint’s smell, the feel of his large hand on my thigh, the residual excitement from the night, or all three, but I wanted him desperately.

“How so?” I closed my eyes when he kissed my neck.

“You’re fearless. Climbing that building without batting an eye.”

Heat grew between my legs. “You would have done the same thing.”

He growled and nibbled my neck.

As soon as we returned to our motel room, Flint had me against the wall and was ripping my clothes off. Afterward, we got in bed and pulled back the covers, sinking into the scratchy sheets.

He pulled me closely to him and kissed me tenderly. The second time we made love slowly, our initial desire sated. We explored each other's bodies as he sank into me once again, filling me slowly and exquisitely, until he took me over the edge, a thousand stars clouding my vision as an orgasm rocked my core.

It was well after five in the morning by the time I curled up beside him and fell asleep. I knew I'd be tired when we woke, but I wanted Flint more than anything. *What if the next few days are the last time we can do this? Love each other? Feel one another?*

I pushed those thoughts aside as sleep came, but dreams plagued me anyway. Dreams of ghostly faces, dark chambers and medical devices. Dreams my subconscious pulled from our pasts that now seemed all too real.

THE NEXT WEEK we staked out the warehouse every night. After the first night, we no longer parked the van on the road for fear someone from O'Brien would eventually notice it. Instead, Amber and Jacinda dropped the six of us off and returned when we called them. Sometimes, they'd go to the shooting range and target shoot. Thankfully, both now felt confident and comfortable handling a loaded weapon.

To appease Father's worries that someone at O'Brien would spot us in the city, we moved to a new motel every few days. They were all the same. Lonely, drab buildings off highways and interstates. Easy accommodation to hide in as we became one with the masses. We still kept a low profile. For the most part, we didn't leave our rooms. When we did, it was only in groups of two or three.

The downtime in between stake outs wasn't wasted. We practiced our skills over and over. I honestly thought I could form energy balls in my sleep by the time December rolled around. I finally felt confident in my ability. It only made me itch to get on with everything.

I knew I wasn't the only one who felt that way.

The antsy feeling in the group grew as the weather changed. Each night the temperature plummeted to freezing, making it harder to

continually spy on O’Brien. Laying on a roof in icy temps wasn’t fun. Neither was climbing up and down a building holding onto frigid ledges and pipes. Even Jet and Jasper’s initial excitement seemed to have worn off.

Surprisingly, the only one in the group who *didn’t* seem anxious to break into the warehouse was Di. Her manic energy that had plagued the group since finding the cabin in the Forbidden Hills had vanished. She was back to being the resolute, dependable leader we all knew her to be. Her decisions now were based on cool judgment versus impulsive desire.

I no longer worried about her. Those days of wanting to storm into O’Brien were gone. All of her decisions seemed to be based on calculated risk.

Now, we knew who the guards were, their routines, and how the loading schedule worked. We never did find out who drove that SUV the first night we staked out the warehouse. It could have been Marcus. It could have been Albert Darlington. We’d never know.

Interestingly, we never saw Father’s former associates. Neither Marcus nor Albert ever entered the warehouse at night. Perhaps their visits were restricted to daytime hours only. If they came at all. I had no idea how involved they still were. A part of me was curious to observe the warehouse at daytime. I could tell Di wanted to as well, but she felt it was too risky. The chance of being spotted with the sun streaming on our backs was much higher. Still, I wanted to do something more.

As per our now normal daily routine, we convened in Di and Jacinda’s room late morning after the previous night’s stake out.

“Ready for another session?” Flint murmured as we walked to their door.

“Can’t wait.”

The latest drab motel we occupied had horrible road noise. Heavy traffic from I-55 was so loud at times I was positive a semi-truck was about to barrel through the window.

“Here we go again,” Flint said.

We were the last to enter the motel room. Flint closed the door behind us. The twins, Mica and Amber perched on one bed. Father sat on the lone chair, while Jacinda lounged on the other bed. Di paced the room. Flint and I opted to lean against the wall.

“What’s up?” Jet called to us.

Flint nodded. “Morning.”

Jet bent his arms behind his head and stretched his legs out on the bed. “A great morning indeed. Ah, I love living the dream.”

Jasper snickered while Mica muffled a laugh.

Di glared at them. “Let’s get serious.”

Her tone wiped Jet’s smirk off his face.

“Tonight, we’re going in. A snowstorm is predicted for tomorrow night. We can’t put off entering any longer.”

Jet bolted upright, his arms falling. “Seriously?”

“Yes, seriously,” Di replied.

Everyone eyed those around them with similar expressions: wide eyes, dropped mouths, and either a grin or frown. Nervous energy bubbled up inside of me.

Finally, the night had come.

“Remember everything we’ve talked about and the training we’ve done,” Di said. “You all need to act dependably and do exactly as I say.”

“Will do.” Jet’s joking demeanor was gone.

Father was the only one who didn’t look excited. A glazed look coated his eyes.

“Now,” Di said. “Of all the scenarios we’ve talked about, I’ve decided on a plan that I believe has the highest chance of success based on what we’ve observed. However, everyone needs to understand their role backward and forward before we can proceed...”

WE SPENT THE rest of the day rehearsing Di’s plan. In a way, it was no different from what we’d practiced for weeks. However, this time it was real. One misstep or wrong move could prove fatal.

It was an incredibly sobering thought.

That night, as we drove to the warehouse, nobody said a word. Road noise filled the void. I shifted my vision and focused on everyone’s clouds. Our energy felt tangible, like a rubber band that stretched and grew between my fingers. I mentally spread it wider. Within seconds, I had an energy ball hovering among us. If I threw it at full force, it would probably shatter the van’s door.

Flint’s hand clenched mine tightly during the drive. It was only when I let the energy ball evaporate, my senses returning to my surroundings, that I felt his grip. His hot, raw energy grew and expanded around him.

The only times I'd felt his energy this high was either in bed or when he was angry. Now, the cause was neither. I knew it was because of fear. For me. The only benefit of that fear was it gave me greater power to work with. With all of us wound so tightly, that meant greater energy balls.

I hoped it was power I could control.

Di drove the van to the industrial park. On day two of our stake outs, when Jacinda almost drove us into a guard rail, it was agreed she would not be the driver. At the time, it had been another thing for the twins to joke about. Now, nobody was laughing.

Not long later, we reached our parking spot. Di pulled off the street just short of where O'Brien's camera surveillance started. The sound of her cutting the engine felt like a life support machine being shut off mid-breath. Gone were the familiar hums, rattle of wheels and comforting warm air that flowed through the dash. The next time the engine started, we'd either be fleeing the scene with three new people in tow, or we would be salvaging an operation that had gone desperately wrong.

"Is everyone ready?" Di asked.

We all nodded. The silence spoke volumes.

"Ski masks on," she instructed.

Everyone pulled the black, knit caps over their faces. When only our eyes were visible, Di nodded. "Let's go."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

We crept out of the van with small, heavy packs slung over our shoulders. They carried the supplies necessary to destroy this place.

In the ski masks, our faces blended into the night. The only face not covered was Jacinda's. Between her looks and charm, the twins' ability to affect emotions and Amber's enhanced olfactory abilities, we would know fairly quickly if a non-violent entry was possible.

Our quiet footsteps barely made a sound as we walked toward the warehouse. The familiar scents of putrid garbage, damp pavement and a lingering chemical smell hovered in the air.

I found Flint's hand. His strong fingers gripped mine. I closed my eyes for the briefest second.

I'm safe. Right now, I'm safe.

Images of my earliest memories at O'Brien flashed through my mind. A dark square cell, a single bed, desk and chair. The room was devoid of color except for my favorite pink teddy bear and the colorful bedspread that Father had bought me. I opened my eyes and stared ahead. *What happened to that bear?* I had no memory of him once we reached the cabin. Father must have left him behind.

I pictured myself entering a cell tonight, searching for one of the captives, but instead spotting that bear. My heart thudded almost painfully against my ribs. It so easily could have been me still locked away, still experimented on, still clutching that ragged stuffed animal. If it wasn't for Father, I'd still be captive too.

The irony of it made me chuff. After all, if it *wasn't* for Father, I never would have been captive in the first place, but without Father who knows what kind of life I would have led. It was possible Jacinda and I wouldn't have survived. With a dead mother, non-existent fathers and no means of taking care of ourselves, we may have died if Father hadn't stolen us. Or perhaps someone would have found us and turned us over to the state. I

could have grown up in foster homes, separated from my sister, never to have known a true family.

Flint squeezed my hand. “Be careful tonight,” he whispered. “I love you.”

I met his gaze in the dark night. His irises were as black as his cap. “I love you too.”

I barely had time to utter the reply before Di made a motion. That signal meant it was time to split into our designated groups. The camera monitoring was about to begin.

Stark fear lined Jacinda’s features before she turned.

“You’ll do fine,” I whispered.

She nodded tightly. “Stay safe, sis.”

My heart clenched. I silently prayed she’d be okay. Jacinda was a gentle soul. She wasn’t made for this. And while I wasn’t necessarily either, I wouldn’t think twice about blasting an energy ball at anyone standing in our way, but my sister wasn’t like that. Even though she had a gun, concealed in her clothes, I knew she’d hesitate. That hesitation could get her killed.

With her head held high, her blond hair shimmering down her back in the moonlight, Jacinda walked quietly away. I tried not to succumb to the worry that it was the last time I’d see her.

“Move,” Di hissed.

Jet, Jasper, Amber and I turned right. Di, Flint and Mica turned left.

In hopes of avoiding detection for as long as possible, everyone stuck to the shadows. Our forms were barely visible in the night.

As the warehouse came into view, I hunched to the ground. The others did the same. Getting through the perimeter fence wasn’t an issue. A few snips from a bolt cutter, a torn hole and we were in.

The two regular night guards stood at the entrance. I switched my vision so I could monitor everyone’s positions. Colorful clouds appeared around my family like radiant bubbles. Di, Flint and Mica hovered behind a wall about twenty yards away. It was the only area the cameras didn’t reach. Jacinda waited behind a building for her cue to go ahead, while the twins, Amber and I huddled motionlessly against a wall. At the moment, the shadows covered us, but one misstep and we’d be exposed.

“Go.” Di’s voice was crystal clear in my ear piece.

Jacinda walked forward, her footsteps now audible on the pavement. The twins tensed before they closed their eyes and channeled emotions to the guards. I knew their powers were turned on full force, not the subtle manipulations they'd done in our stake outs.

Amazingly, Jacinda got within ten feet of the guards before they noticed. In the warehouse lighting, her hair trailed down her back in a golden waterfall. One of the guards smiled a suggestive grin. The other stared mutely. It seemed the twins had mastered their powers well. Regardless, I pulled up my energy and formed an energy ball just in case.

"Hey, fellas," Jacinda said pleasantly. Any sense of her earlier fear was well masked.

"Hi, gorgeous," the grinning one replied.

The other stared, swaying listlessly.

"Say you couldn't give me a hand, could you?" Jacinda flung her hair over her shoulder. "My car broke down a block away, and my cell phone's dead. I'm new to town and accidentally drove into this area. I'm not sure where to get help."

I smiled at her tone. Jacinda played the damsel in distress brilliantly.

"Oh yeah, of course." The smiling guard leered. "We could call you a tow truck or I could take a look. I'm pretty good with cars." The guard didn't seem fazed that Jacinda had sauntered up to him when a perimeter fence should have kept her out. The twins were obviously doing a good job.

"I bet you are," Jacinda replied. "Do you think your friend could help too?"

The guard who stood docile didn't respond. He was the one with the white cloud that I was hoping we could get on our side, but considering he seemed too lost in the twins' spell, I wasn't sure that was an option.

"Ethan, let's go help this lady," the guard said.

"Ah," Ethan replied. "Um . . ."

Jacinda waited a moment before turning back to the first guard, apparently giving up on Ethan. "Do you think you could come with me?" She grinned.

The guard's mouth dropped.

Supermodel smile. Works every time.

"With strong hands like yours, I'm sure you'd be able to fix my car in no time."

The guard snickered, his chest puffing up.

The twins shuffled beside me, and for the first time, I looked at them. Sweat beaded along their eyebrows. Jasper gave a small groan. I tried not to be concerned by the sweat glistening around their eyes, but my stomach flipped. If they were struggling to control the guards, we could be in trouble.

I nudged Amber. “Do you smell anything concerning?”

“No,” she whispered. “They’re both feeling happy.”

Jacinda smiled at the first guard again and tugged Ethan.

“Oh . . . um . . . I suppose we could go.” Ethan seemed to shake himself.

“Yeah, we’ll help you,” the other guard said.

“Great!” Jacinda beamed. “Follow me.”

The guards trailed behind her like lost puppies, arms at their sides, docile expressions. Jacinda led them to where Di, Mica and Flint waited. It was the only area where the cameras weren’t able to get a full view. If we’d all been able to hide in that area, that’s where we’d have waited. However, it was a small patch. Fitting three bodies in there was pushing it.

When the guards rounded the corner to where Flint, Di and Mica waited a slight commotion sounded and then . . . silence.

“Done,” Di said a moment later. In other words, Flint had successfully knocked both guards unconscious and hid them in the shadows.

I let out a sigh of relief.

Both twins’ eyes opened, gasping exhales escaping them. An aching fifteen seconds passed, and then Di’s voice came on again. “Mica’s ready.”

Closing my eyes, I gathered my energy deep inside of me. It hummed through my veins as I became centered. Using that control, I pulled my cloud off my shoulders and opened my eyes. I mixed my aura with the twins’ and Amber’s. Molding our clouds into a tangible ball, I struggled slightly until it hovered above us. In case some unknown guard appeared from inside, alerted that the outer guards had disappeared, I needed to be prepared.

“I have one ready,” I said through the communication system.

Flint and Mica abruptly burst from cover. They moved in a blur, Flint carrying Mica. With how fast Flint moved, the cameras wouldn’t be able to accurately see them. Even in slow motion, their ski-masked faces would probably be distorted.

They reached the guard's station before I could blink. A loud smash signified the camera had been destroyed, a single punch from Flint doing the trick. Flint quickly went to work on the guard's panel. If he was successful, each camera stationed around the warehouse would be shutting down one by one. We didn't know how long we had before that raised any security flags at other O'Brien locations, but we weren't foolish enough to think it wouldn't. We needed to move quickly.

Mica positioned her eye in front of the retinal scan after swiping the guard's security badge. Just as Flint's voice sounded in the earpiece, the door slid open.

"Done," he said.

All of us ran to them. Without working cameras, we no longer had to worry about our movements being detected. I tried to keep my ball together, but it fell apart when I began running. *Dammit!*

Di and Jacinda stationed themselves outside. Jacinda acted as the lookout while Di stayed in the guard's station, continuing to hack into the system as much as she could. I started over with my powers and readied another ball.

None of us said anything.

Moving as a team, the twins, Flint, Amber, Mica and I stepped into the warehouse. Mica clutched the security badge as if her life depended on it. My heart pounded as I finally formed another ball.

Amazingly, nobody greeted us when we stepped inside. The interior station was suspiciously empty. Worrying thoughts sprang into my mind. *Have they detected us? Did the guard go for help? Or is this the norm? Is this station no longer manned?*

"Keep moving," Flint said in clipped tones.

He was right. We didn't have time to wonder.

Flint took the lead. A stale smell permeated the air as though fresh air never circulated these halls. Our footsteps tapped on the gray, concrete floors. Tall solid walls lined the hallway. There were no windows anywhere. Closed doors flew past us in our rush. I knew from the blueprint that most of those doors led to labs. The layout was exactly as the blueprint and Father described.

I took some comfort in seeing an identical layout to what we'd known, but I couldn't shake my growing sense of dread. *Where is everyone?*

At our first turn, we passed another empty guard station. My heart rate increased. Nobody hesitated, however. Our training had been drummed into us. *Move! Move! Move!*

When we got to the elevator, I *knew* my instinct was right. Something was wrong. Other than the two guards outside, we hadn't encountered anyone else. The twins eyed me with worried gazes. Amber looked as if she was going to pass out, while Mica's heightened energy was almost palpable.

Flint's energy rolled off him in seismic waves. "Do you smell anyone, Amber?"

Amber shook her head. "Nobody's close."

"Mica, switch your retinas." His voice was tight, his words clipped.

I used our heightened emotions to grow my energy ball. Just in case.

Mica stepped closer to let the security device scan her eyes while she swiped the stolen badge. A long minute passed.

A soft ding sounded that the security information was accepted. Flint pushed the elevator button forcefully. Red digits above the elevator lit up. S3. The elevator had been at the bottom level. That was where we were going. We'd have to wait for it to ascend.

The hum of the elevator filled the silent void. We all stood staring at the metallic doors. Nobody said a word. It was so quiet that I could hear blood whooshing through my ears. I took a deep breath. The red digits moved slowly.

Jet and Jasper twitched beside me. One of them tapped a foot.

"Come on, come on, come on," Jasper muttered. "What's taking so long?"

Another ding sounded and the humming stopped. Amber made a quiet mewling sound and stepped back. "Something's not right." She reached for her gun. "Something's not right! I smell—"

The door slid open. Two men stood inside the elevator, their guns aimed at our faces.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Flint and I reacted before my brain fully assessed the situation. One second, the guards looked ready to pull the triggers, the next, they lay knocked out on the ground. Between my energy ball followed by two, powerful blows to their heads from Flint, each guard fell in milliseconds.

The guards probably hadn't known what hit them.

Amber stared wide-eyed. Flint and I had been so fast, she hadn't had time to draw her gun. Flint rubbed his fist while I leaned down and felt the guard's pulses.

"Both alive."

With shaky legs, I stood. My heart raced, yet I summoned another energy ball in case we needed it. At first, I couldn't. I took another deep breath and tried again, briefly closing my eyes to call upon my energy. It slowly formed.

"Do you think you can contain them?" Flint asked Amber and Jet.

Both stared mutely at the fallen men.

"Amber! Jet!" Flint yelled.

"Um, yeah . . ." Amber finally mumbled. She gripped her gun tighter.

"I've got my chloroform." Jet's normal joking demeanor was gone, his mouth a tight line.

"Let's move." Flint reached down and snatched the guard's badges. He moved the guards out of the elevator to lay in a heap at Jet and Amber's feet. "Mica, you should match your retinas to one of these guards."

"Oh, yeah," Mica said.

I hadn't thought of that either. Luckily, Flint was thinking faster than any of us. Who knew if the outdoor security guards had clearance in the subterranean levels which was obviously where these two guards had come from.

Flint, Mica, Jasper and I stepped into the elevator after Mica's eyes shone hazel.

I stared at the buttons inside. There were three subterranean levels. Father had prepared us for that. We needed to descend to level three. That's where the lost children were kept.

I hastily punched in S3. The elevator doors closed. The last things I saw were Jet's worried blue eyes and Amber's brown ones. Both stared at us through their ski masks. The image of a panda bear abruptly entered my mind since that's kind of what they looked like in a weird, morphed way. A surge of hysterical laughter almost followed. I swallowed it down.

Get a grip, Lena. You need to stay focused!

The elevator hummed as we began to descend.

We all stood motionless, our bodies tensed and ready. The ride seemed to take forever. I used the moment to take a few deep breaths until my heart rate slowed. I kept my energy ball in place and made it grow. Thankfully, it was relatively easy since so much energy strummed between the four of us.

The elevator finally reached S3 and came to a jolting halt. We pressed ourselves against the walls and tensed. The doors slid open.

I expected more guards.

None waited.

The elevator opened to an empty, dimly lit hall. Cautiously, we stepped out. This was our weakest moment. The cells started ten yards to the right, but we still had to pass another guard station and get through one more access door. The station stood at the end of the hall. I didn't see anyone in it.

Mica's head whipped around. "There's no one here."

Jasper nodded toward the empty guard station ahead. "Those two guards must have come from there."

"There's really nobody else?" I said.

We hurriedly walked to the station.

Nighttime lighting illuminated dark gray concrete walls. The farther we got from the elevator, the more I noticed the stillness in the air. Nothing lingered in it. It was vacant feeling, empty almost, as if the world down here didn't exist. Like time stood still.

My heart pounded again despite my efforts to remain calm. I remembered that feeling. A brief memory stirred deep within my mind. It was of me when . . .

"Keep it together, everyone," Flint murmured.

Hearing his voice jolted me back to the present. The memory vanished.

When we reached the station, Flint cautiously peeked inside. “It’s empty.”

Jasper stepped in front of the desk and assessed the screens and computer system. His blue eyes darted around, taking in the array of monitors. A dozen of the screens were fuzzy, probably from the cameras we’d disabled outside and upstairs. I guessed Di also had a hand in it. Some of the screens had descriptions etched into labels beneath them. *West loading dock. Rear laboratory, S2. Holding cell, S1*. The screens were all fuzzy. My gaze alighted on a working screen.

Elevator door, main level.

The screen showed an image of the two unconscious guards laying on the floor. Amber and Jet stood above them. All I could see were Jet and Amber’s darkly clad bodies. Not even their eyes were visible.

No wonder the guards had known we were coming. They’d seen us. Now, the question was whether or not they’d alerted anyone else.

My gaze drifted farther along the vast wall of security images. Jasper’s fingers flew across the keyboard. One by one, the screens grew fuzzy.

Mica fidgeted quietly beside me. When my gaze traveled to the next wall, my breath sucked in.

The screens that monitored the cells were still lit up.

I stepped closer, my mouth dropping. For the first time, I got a glimpse of the three individuals we were attempting to rescue. All three lay asleep, each in their own cell. Their bodies were covered in blankets. I had no idea if they were men or women.

The sight of those chambers brought memories crashing back like an avalanche ripping down a mountain. They were memories I didn’t want to remember.

Memories I’d worked so hard to forget.

I felt myself sucked into a void, my grasp on reality slipping from my hands. My vision swam in and out of focus as a memory pummeled me.

“No, please! I don’t want to go!” I cried.

Hands reached for me, a sinister voice telling me it was all okay.

I clenched my teddy bear tightly to my chest. “Please, no!” I cried again.

“It’s all right, Lena. Be a good girl. This will only hurt for a moment.”

The man reached for me. A syringe rested in his hand. The sharp needle looked ominous and deadly.

I shrank against my bed. Tears sprang into my eyes.

"Lena!" a voice shouted.

Flint hunkered down in front of me. His dark, bottomless eyes searching mine. His hands rested on my shoulders. He shook me slightly.

"Babe, are you all right?"

It took a moment for me to realize what happened. The memory had felt so real, so vivid. I slowly nodded as the memory faded. "Yeah. I'm . . . yeah, I'm fine." I shook myself internally and took a deep breath.

Seemingly satisfied, he turned and assessed the screens. The energy rolling off him increased. I stepped closer to him and inhaled deeply. His unique scent flooded me. It was the sweetest smell I'd ever experienced. I inhaled again.

His scent anchored me to reality.

Despite seeming calm and focused, I still picked up on the tense way Flint stood and the fearful gleam that coated his gaze. His eyes darted from screen to screen as he assessed our situation. I could only imagine what ran through his head right now.

"Don't we need to get moving?" I said.

Jasper's fingers shook as he worked on the computer. After a few minutes, the remaining camera screens went blank.

"Done," Jasper said.

Flint nodded curtly. "Let's move."

We hurried to the last access door. Flint swiped the badge he'd grabbed from the guards in the elevator while Mica placed her eyes on the scan. The door opened with a hiss. According to the security camera, the three lost children were kept in the cells closest to the door. I knew we needed to race to them, but after I stepped inside, I faltered.

The smell here was different from the hallway—sharper, more distinct. The air inside this locked, subterranean prison smelled like metal and had a stale, almost man-made taste to it. I didn't know how else to describe it. I'd never in my life smelled anything like it except here. It brought back something inside of me that had died when Father had taken us away.

Fear, in its most basic and primal form, consumed me.

I felt like cowering to the ground or hiding under a chair. I took a deep, staggering breath as I tried to stay focused and grounded in the present. When Jasper spoke, I jumped.

"Anyone want to get out of here as much as I do?" he whispered.

“Yes,” Mica squeaked.

What stood in front of us was too malicious to comprehend. The corridor stretched farther than I could see. It seemed to go forever. Empty cells lined each side of the hall. Door after door stared back at me.

I knew the warehouse could hold up to ninety kids even though Project Renatus had never grown that big. I squeezed my eyes tightly shut, as another deeply buried memory surfaced. It was of being held down on a metal table while something was injected into my arm. A man stood over me. It wasn’t Father, but the bad man.

Marcus.

Flint was the first to take action. Sweat dripped from his face, and from the tensed flexing of his hands into fists over and over, I knew he was reliving memories too.

“Let’s get them and get out,” he said.

Flint and I hurried to the first cell while Jasper and Mica went to the second. Luckily, the doors only required the card swipe to unlock. A beep sounded after Flint swiped it. He threw the badge to Jasper.

Flint and I stepped inside. The cell was dark, only a dim light above the door showed any illumination. I squinted, trying to make out details. The person contained within lay under covers in the bed. He, or she, I couldn’t be sure yet, stirred when Flint and I entered.

“Hello?” I said.

“No!” the person abruptly yelled. It was a female voice.

Wild eyes met ours. Long, dark hair fell in snarls around her. She bolted upright and pulled her covers with her, cowering in the corner of her bed.

I switched my vision. Her cloud appeared. All concern I had for what had been done to them multiplied by a thousand.

Dozens and dozens of bright colors shifted above her. More colors than I’d ever seen. More colors than even Father. This woman had been drugged again and again. It was a miracle she was still alive.

“We’re not here to hurt you.” I stepped forward with my hands up. “We’re here to help. We want to take you away.” My voice shook.

The woman didn’t seem to hear me. She shouted and clung to her covers, trying to bury herself beneath them. Angry yells and obscenities came from the cell Jasper and Mica had entered. A male voice told Jasper and Mica exactly what he’d do if they came any closer.

It wasn’t pretty.

For a moment, I stood rooted to the spot. Of all the scenarios our group had practiced, and of all the obstacles we thought we’d have to overcome, the one we *didn’t* see happening was exactly what was unfolding.

Trying to rescue captives who didn’t want rescuing.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

My gaze whipped to Flint's. "What do we do?"

The female cowered in her bed. In the dim lighting, I could barely see her. Blankets bunched around her, hiding her body and face. She was small, I knew that much. She also had long dark hair. Besides that, I had no idea what she looked like.

"We need to get them out of here. *Now*," Flint stated. "We spent too long in the guard station dismantling the cameras." Flint put his hands on his hips. Sharp power radiated off him. "Jasper! Mica!" he yelled. "What's your situation like?"

"Not good!" Mica replied from the room next door.

A snarl sounded from that direction. Goosebumps rose on my arms.

"We have no choice." Flint pulled a cloth rag and bottle of chloroform from his pack.

The woman watched us, the blanket pulled up to her eyeballs. She tensed when Flint carefully wet the rag. He made sure to keep it at arm's length.

"Should we tell her that we're going to drug—"

Before I could finish my sentence, Flint was behind the woman with the rag to her mouth. She fought violently. The blanket fell, revealing thin arms and lean legs. She thrashed against him. It was heartbreaking to watch. I could tell she put every ounce of strength she had into escaping, but she didn't stand a chance against Flint's grip.

When she slumped in his arms, he let go. "Tie her up. Just to be safe."

He disappeared out the door before I could reply.

I quickly pulled a rope from my pack as the woman lay unconscious on the bed. My fingers brushed the explosives that laid at the bottom of the backpack. Those would come next.

Guilt smothered me as I tied quick release knots around her wrists and ankles. Never had I ever expected to bind somebody like this in my

lifetime. It was too cruel for me to process right now, but we needed to get them safely out of the warehouse.

Just do what needs to be done, Lena!

I finished tying her and rolled her over. She was so thin it was easy to move her. I brushed the hair from her face and glanced at her features as I stuffed the remaining rope in my bag. A frighteningly thin, almost gaunt face stared back at me. Long, dark lashes rested against her cheeks, and matted hair fell almost to her waist.

A commotion sounded from the hallway. Another snarl reached my ears. I quickly double checked my knots before racing out. My eyes widened when I saw what was happening.

A huge man, bigger than Flint, fought with Flint, Mica and Jasper in the hall.

The man's shoulders had to be three feet wide. Hands that would have spanned a dinner plate were fisted. He swung and fought against Flint and Jasper. Mica had him around the legs, but she couldn't get his legs to buckle.

At one point the man, dressed in loose pants and a T-shirt, almost nailed Jasper in the head. Luckily, the twin ducked in time. Flint meanwhile had his arms around the big man's neck while Jasper tried to wrench the man's arms behind his back. Neither was succeeding. I could tell Flint was trying to choke the man enough for him to lose consciousness. It wasn't working.

"A little help!" Jasper panted.

Panic rose in me as I saw the man raise his arm to hit Flint. He was aiming for Flint's head. In that moment, the world around me disappeared. Power welled up inside of me, radiating into my cloud until it crackled. *Not Flint! Nobody is allowed to hurt Flint!*

"Get back!" I yelled.

Flint, Mica and Jasper jumped out of the way.

Turning, the large man's gaze met mine. Gold, almost glowing eyes, stared at me with absolute hatred. He took a step forward. I slammed the energy ball down on his shoulders.

He fell in a heap.

When the huge man rolled listlessly, Mica hesitantly approached his side. She nudged him with her foot. He didn't move. Leaning over, she placed her fingers against his pulse. "Still alive."

Jasper doubled over, panting, his hands on his knees. “Shit.” He shook his head, still panting. “Just . . . shit.”

“He’s stronger than you?” I asked Flint.

Flint’s chest rose and fell heavily. His ski mask had come off during the fight. Wild chestnut-colored hair swirled around his head, sticking out on all ends. It was a good thing we’d dismantled all of the security cameras or O’Brien Pharmaceuticals would have a clear image of his face.

“Yeah, he’s stronger.” Flint put his mask back on. His hands shook. It was the first time Flint hadn’t been able to overpower someone.

“Where’s the one from your cell?” Mica asked.

“I . . . uh . . . tied her up.”

Mica pulled the rope from her pack. “Good. Let’s tie him up too.”

I stepped closer and kneeled down to help. “Will ropes hold him?”

“Probably not.” Mica began looping coils of rope around the man’s arms. “Let’s do it anyway. At least it’ll slow him down if he wakes up.”

We set to work as Jasper and Flint approached the third cell. When they opened the door, I didn’t see anyone but I heard his voice.

“Me finks, you blokes are trouble,” the voice said.

The accent caught me off guard. *British?*

I didn’t have time to ponder it. Jasper and Flint brought a man out, each of them gripping one of his arms. He was of modest height, maybe around five foot ten. Dark, ebony skin, a shaved head and frightened eyes were the only features I noticed in my hurried glance. He thrashed and yelled against Jasper and Flint, his movements panicked.

“Are we going to knock him out?” I asked.

Flint held the man’s arms as he struggled. “It would be safer.”

With bile rising in my throat, I grabbed the chloroform. The man opened his mouth to scream, which in a way worked to our advantage. I covered his mouth and nose with a soaked rag. I had to fight the nausea that rolled in my stomach over what I was doing.

The Brit fell in seconds.

Breathing quickly, I dropped the rag and surveyed our work. One woman and two men. All unconscious. Guilt rose in the back of my throat. “That didn’t exactly go to plan.”

Mica rearranged her mask. “At least they’re safe.”

I turned to Flint. “Should we plant the explosives and get out of here?”

“Yeah, you, Mica and Jasper plant the bombs. I’ll carry these three to the elevator.” Flint lifted the Brit as if he weighed ten pounds. He lifted the woman next. “And be careful.”

In a flash, he was gone.

Mica, Jasper and I wasted no time. We’d worked out where to plant the explosives from the blueprint and critical research areas that Father knew about. However, racing down the hall, to seal an explosive at the end of the ninety cells ranked as one of the creepiest things I’d ever done. The void of the place made it feel like a tomb. At the end of the hall, it felt as though the walls were closing in on me, that I couldn’t breathe. I fought long-buried memories the entire time.

By the time the three of us joined Flint at the elevator, I was sweating profusely. So were the others.

“Is everything okay upstairs?” Flint asked.

Jasper closed his eyes. His face twitched a few times. “So far, so good.”

“Then we stop at S1 to plant more bombs,” Flint said curtly. “After that, we’re getting out.”

The two men and woman lay in a heap on the elevator floor. It was awkward standing with them at our feet. The four of us crowded together in a corner as the elevator ascended.

When we reached S1, Flint did most of the bomb planting. I stayed with the captives on the off chance any of them woke up. When Flint, Jasper and Mica returned, all were wild-eyed and breathing heavily.

“Let’s get out of here,” Jasper said.

Mica jumped into the elevator. “I couldn’t agree more.”

I could only imagine what labs and research areas they’d seen in their hurried dash through the S1 level. I wasn’t sure I wanted to know.

JET AND AMBER almost hugged us when we finally returned to the main level.

“Am I glad to see you guys,” Jet muttered.

Flint glanced around. “Did anything happen up here?”

Amber shook her head and nodded at the guards. “They’re both still sound asleep. Neither has made a sound.”

“There has to be more guards coming,” I said. “We need to hurry.”

“Mica and Amber, carry the woman,” Flint said.

Amber and Jet's eyes widened as they peeked into the elevator. "They're unconscious?"

"No time to explain now," I said. "We'll tell you later."

The dark haired woman appeared to be sleeping peacefully. Amber only hesitated a second before she grabbed her arms. Mica picked up her legs. They lifted her easily.

"Jet and Jasper, you carry him." Flint pointed to the bald man. "I'll carry the big one and come back for the guards. Lena, you plant the explosives up here. Do you remember where?"

"Yeah." I grabbed the pack Jet had been carrying and got to work. We were fairly certain nobody else was in the facility. We'd never seen evidence of researchers or O'Brien employees working here at night. It was only the guards, and we were getting all of them out.

Using the security badge, I ducked into the first room with a structural pillar. It was a lab. Rows of equipment lined the walls. A heavy scent of disinfectant hung in the air. I quickly secured the bomb in the corner before going back into the hall and heading toward the building's other main structural posts.

Father had told me where to plant the bombs. I struggled to remember. My brain felt fried, and my heart pounded so hard it hurt. *Stay focused. We're almost done!*

Pulling out my map, I surveyed the three other locations I needed to find. My hands shook before I stuffed the map back in the pack. The next two locations I found easily enough. I kept my eyes glued to the posts and the bombs. My head spun. Sweat poured out of me.

The last room was in the corner of the building. I faintly heard the others hauling the remaining guard out. Silence followed. *They must have all gone outside.* Swiping the guard's security badge, I hastily opened the last door. Before I entered the room, I knew something was off.

It took me a second to understand what was wrong. Moonlight poured into the room from an open door. Fresh cold air swirled inside.

My insides chilled.

A door to the outside was on the far wall. It was open. *How come that wasn't on the blueprint? And* why *is it open?*

Nobody was in the room. My gaze darted around. *Maybe a security guard fled from here when he realized what we were doing.* I raced to the last pillar and began strapping the bomb to it.

A shuffle of steps, and another flow of fresh air over the skin not covered by my mask, almost made me scream.

“What do we have here?”

The man’s voice was like icy tentacles crawling down my spine. I stood and turned.

In the dark, I couldn’t make out his face, only his outline in the moonlight. He stood in the doorway, the cold outdoor air swirling his long coat around his legs. I switched my vision. The ominous black cloud that pulsed around him told me exactly who the newcomer was. The child in me remembered.

Marcus.

“I couldn’t believe it when my security team told me we’d been breached.” He stepped forward. “Luckily, I was still at the office, otherwise I wouldn’t have arrived in time to see who it was.”

I hastily took a step back. My leg brushed a bench. I almost fell.

“Who are you?” he asked. His tone was neither fearful nor worried, merely curious.

My gaze darted to the door I’d entered.

Marcus’ did too. “An entire security team is on their way. You won’t get away.”

Hearing his cold words and absolute conviction that our plan was tumbling down around us did something to me. The little girl inside of me, the five-year-old who cringed and cried anytime this man came near me in the past, began to scream. I muffled the sound that wanted to erupt from my throat.

Focus, Lena! You’re not a little girl anymore. You’re strong and capable. Draw up your power. Now!

I pulled at my inner cloud, but I was shaking so badly.

Nothing happened.

“When I remove that mask, I have a feeling I’ll know who’s underneath it. I see a few red curls peeking out the sides.” He smiled. In the dim light, his white even teeth appeared. “I couldn’t believe it when an observer told me he thought he’d spotted Conroy’s children in the Chicago area a few days ago—all grown up now I see. How long have I been searching for you? Fifteen years? Sixteen years? And in all that time, there have been no sightings of you. ‘Where could they be,’ I’d often ask myself.

I knew you were out there." He smiled broader. "I knew it was only a matter of time before I'd find you again."

"Stay back!" I yelled.

His eyebrows rose. "Or what?" He chuckled. "From how scared you sound, I see that you're still a little girl. Aren't you . . . *Galena*?"

My heart pounded as he advanced on me.

I closed my eyes and focused on the swirling fear that wanted to consume me. If I didn't stop him, my family wouldn't know what was coming.

They could all die.

They could all be captured.

I'd lose Flint.

You need to stop him, Lena!

Using my despair, fear and worry, I drew up the energy inside of me and pushed it out. I called on everything in the area: Marcus' cloud, the stray animals in the parking lot where Marcus had entered from, my family's clouds as they moved the captives into the van in front of the building. Everything. I needed all of it.

I drew it together until a powerful ball hovered above me. Opening my eyes, I didn't flinch when I saw that Marcus stood only two yards away, a gleam in his eyes.

I leveled him with an icy stare. "I'm *not* a little girl anymore!"

When my energy ball hit him, amazement flashed across his face right before he sailed off his feet. My ball blasted him out the door to land on his back fifty feet into the parking lot. I didn't wait to see if he stood.

I turned and ran.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

I was shaking so badly when I reached the others I almost collapsed. From the feelings emitting from Flint's cloud, I knew he spotted me. The fear and worry that strummed through his cloud abated.

For a moment, I just stood there. I felt positive that at any second, the backup security team would careen through the gates. Jacinda hugged me briefly. I barely felt it. Our van idled ahead, parked just outside the gate. It appeared almost everyone was inside, along with the captives. Only one, unconscious guard still lay on the ground near the warehouse.

I knew I needed to warn everyone, but my mouth wouldn't move.

Jacinda pulled me toward the van. "Come on. We need to get going."

I numbly ran with her and almost fell inside the van.

The twins, Mica and Amber were already seated in the back. The three captives lay unconscious in the middle. Jacinda hunkered down at my side. Everyone's energy poured off them like water blasting from a fire hydrant. It was high enough to make me nauseous.

"We've been here twenty-six minutes." Di climbed into the driver's seat and slammed the door. "That's too long. We need to get out of here. *Now*. They're coming."

Jacinda tensed.

I opened my mouth to tell Di that she was right, that we needed to hurry, that Marcus knew.

Nothing came out.

"Did you have a vision?" Flint asked. He still stood outside the van. He was the only one not inside.

Di nodded. "An O'Brien security team is on its way. One of the guards must have alerted them. It's going to be close, but I think we can beat them."

"I have one more guard to dump by the others. I'll be right back." Flint disappeared.

"NO!" A word finally ripped out of me.

Flint was back before I could blink. He jumped into the van. When our eyes met, he gazed at me questioningly before he slammed the van's sliding door.

With a spin of tires, Di stomped on the gas pedal. Flint moved to my side. I grabbed hold of him and pulled him into a hug.

He held me tightly. I let his feel and scent wash over me. He rubbed my back. "You're shaking."

The dumped sedated guards were barely visible through the back window as we drove down the street. Flint had left them by a building outside of O'Brien's perimeter fence. It was far enough away that they should be safe from the explosion.

My mind shifted to Marcus. *Will he survive it?*

Cold air blew in through Di's cracked window. A slight drizzle fell on the windshield. My ski mask felt hot and itchy. I ripped it off before burrowing again into Flint's embrace. The worry in his cloud grew.

"Babe, what happened? You're really shaking."

I tried to tell him. Again, nothing came out. Part of me didn't feel connected to reality.

Swirling lights lit up the windows. An SUV raced past us, going toward the warehouse. My eyes widened as the O'Brien Pharmaceuticals logo flashed in a streetlight.

"You better call that number to detonate the explosions, Jasper." Flint's voice rumbled in his chest.

"Gladly." Jasper tapped in the numbers on his phone.

A LOUD EXPLOSION and fiery light filled the sky. The van rumbled and shook. It was that powerful.

Amber plastered her face to the van's back window while the twins and Mica watched over her shoulders. The O'Brien SUV careened to a halt a few blocks behind us. Six men jumped out, rifles in their grips, their faces trained on the blast. They disappeared from view when Di swerved around a corner. Only a large billowing black cloud signified the place where our beginnings began.

I knew within minutes this area would be swarming with more O'Brien employees and first responders. I had no idea if the distance I blasted Marcus into the parking lot would mean he'd survive. While I

wanted to be free from him, I didn’t want to murder him. I could only hope he’d live.

Hopefully, the mess we’d left would keep things complicated. Between O’Brien having to explain the gigantic three-story hole in the earth from a “storage warehouse,” four unconscious security guards piled in an alleyway, and a potential dead body in a parking lot, they’d stay plenty busy.

I slumped into Flint as Di rocketed onto the interstate. My hands still shook, but at least I seemed to be thinking more clearly.

“We actually pulled it off!” Mica exclaimed, breaking the silence. “We freakin’ did it!”

The twins were the next to cheer followed by Amber and Jacinda’s grins. Only Flint seemed unaffected.

“Something happened. Didn’t it?” His dark eyes appeared solemn while the rest of our family reveled in our victory.

“Yes,” was all I managed.

His grip tightened on me.

I let him support me as some of the shock from encountering Marcus wore off. Our victorious outcome seemed too good to be true. All of us got out alive with the three lost children.

It was exactly the scenario we’d hoped for.

However, even though blowing up O’Brien’s warehouse would make continuing Project Renatus nearly impossible, or at least significantly delay it, it didn’t mean we were out of danger. There were now twelve people alive, eleven in this van, that were living proof of what the pharmaceutical company had done. Given what Father told us about Marcus, I’d be surprised if he let this end quietly.

Flint leaned over and buried his nose in my hair, inhaling deeply. With our ski masks off, we were a sea of white and olive faces sitting atop darkly clad bodies. He clasped my hand into his as the van jostled and dipped on the rough road.

“Are you ready to tell me what happened?”

I peered into his dark eyes. “Marcus.”

He tensed. “Marcus? He was there?”

I nodded.

The cheering in the van died. “Wait, what did you say?” Jasper asked, leaning forward. “You saw *Marcus?*”

“Yeah.” My voice shook. I cleared my throat. “He was in the last room where I planted the bomb. There was a door to that parking lot on the north side. He came in through there.”

“What door?” Jet’s energy strummed into me.

“It wasn’t on the blueprint. They must have added it after the warehouse was constructed.”

Flint’s arms tightened around mine. Hot energy poured from him.

“What did he do?” Jacinda asked hesitantly.

“Nothing, but he knows who we are. I guess one of his *observers*, as he called them, spotted us a few days ago. Father was right. All this time, where we didn’t think anybody was actually looking for us, we were wrong. Marcus has been searching for us the entire time.”

Silence followed.

Mica leaned forward. “How did you get away?”

“I blasted him with an energy ball. He shot right out of the door.”

Flint’s energy kicked up another notch. “I should have been there.”

“We’re almost to the airport,” Di cut in. “Right now our main concern needs to be getting out of Chicago. We can talk about Marcus later.”

Police sirens and fire trucks sounded in the distance. The burning warehouse was now miles away, but the flashing lights came from all directions and were heading that way.

Random security cameras in the general area of O’Brien’s warehouse would inevitably catch glimpses of our van leaving. We knew that. Once the police ran through the tapes, they’d know our van had been in the area for weeks. After that, they’d inevitably trace the van back to the used car dealership. I hoped the disguise Father used meant he’d never be identified.

I leaned into Flint as Di exited the interstate.

As for the van, it would need to be destroyed. I had no idea how that would happen, but Father said he’d arrange it. Not for the first time, I wondered how many people around the country were on Father’s payroll. Since one of those contacts had supplied us with explosives, I knew most of the people on Father’s payroll walked on the wrong side of the law.

A sign for the airport flashed by the front window. Thankfully, the people we’d rescued showed no signs of rousing. I used the moment to study them. It was the first time I’d really looked at them, and it was a much needed distraction.

They had to be around our age since all of the lost children were collected within a few years of one another, but from the gaunt face and sunken eyes of the small female, she appeared older than early twenties. The men were in better shape, physically at least. The largest male was heavily muscled. I knew his eyes were a strange golden color from that brief moment he'd tried to attack me. His hair drew my attention. It was shaggy and the color of dark caramel. He had beautiful hair. The other male, the smaller one, had a shaved head, dark skin and a musky scent.

I switched my vision.

My throat tightened as I studied the vast array of bright colors in their clouds. Similar to the female, both males had dozens of colors. These three had been experimented on and drugged again and again. Their clouds couldn't lie. It was a miracle they'd survived.

My chest tightened. I'd been so lucky. The woman laying at my feet, breathing deeply and evenly in her drugged state, could very well have been me, Jacinda, Amber, Di or Mica. And the smaller man laying beside Jasper, with his shaved head and scarred arms, could have been Flint or one of the twins.

I wanted to cry.

Father said he'd hoped to make better lives for all of the lost children stolen from their families, not just us. However, judging from the adults that lay at our feet, I realized that was completely opposite to what actually happened.

WE ARRIVED AT the airport and loaded the three unconscious individuals onto Father's plane. Greg helped. Considering our pilot assisted us, didn't ask any questions, and didn't bat an eye—made me understand how Father had drugged and deposited all of us in various cities almost eight months ago.

Jet grunted as he, Jasper and Greg loaded the larger man onto the plane.

"Jeez, what is he made of? Lead?" Jet murmured after they'd strapped him into his seat.

"Could be," Mica said with a shrug.

Jacinda eyed the large male, a curious glint in her gaze.

Di and I had no problems carrying the woman. We sat her beside the large male and clicked her seat belt in place. She was so tiny, I could have

handled her on my own.

Flint sat the last man onto a free seat. After that, he and Greg loaded our minimal luggage. When finished, Father ushered everyone aboard the plane.

“Let’s get going. What happened is all over the news.”

Greg gave a curt nod. “I’ll get the engines started.”

None of us had mentioned Marcus. Di was right. We needed to escape from Chicago first.

After everyone was on the plane, Father departed briefly. I watched out the window as he hurried to a man standing on the tarmac. The man seemed to have come from the shadows as if materializing out of nowhere. Goosebumps rose on my arms. I had a feeling he was a man used to dark places.

I couldn’t see the man’s features, but he appeared of normal height and build. He and Father spoke for a few seconds, their heads dipped toward one another. Father handed him something. Moonlight glinted off it. Startled, I realized he’d given the man the van keys. After Father said something else, the man turned, climbed into the van and drove away. I had no idea how that man would get rid of the van, but I felt fairly certain that vehicle would never be seen by anyone again.

With Father back aboard and the cabin door closed, Greg told us to ready for departure. “Headwind looks minimal. We should be back in four hours.”

“Where are we going?” Amber asked.

Father smiled. His hazel eyes looked tired, but I sensed a flicker of relief in them too. “Back to Arizona. That home is still safe.”

“Really?” I pushed up in my seat.

“Yes, Galena.”

A surge of happiness coursed through me that we’d return to our desert home. Having something familiar and stable was what I craved before we dug into our new job: helping the new three in whatever way we could.

“Hungry?” Flint pulled an energy bar from his pocket as we taxied to the runway.

My mouth watered at the sight. “Now that you ask, yes.” I hadn’t realized I was starving until my stomach churned. I couldn’t believe it had only been seven hours since supper.

As Greg maneuvered the plane toward the runway, Jet jumped out of his seat to raid the minibar and small kitchen area. He returned with candy bars, sandwiches, bags of nuts and pretzels, and bottles of alcohol and soda. When Jet popped the top to a beer, even Di grinned.

I sat back and drank a fizzy Cola, loving the sweet taste and bubbly texture.

“Everyone get seated and buckled,” Greg called. “We’re next to takeoff.”

Moments later, we sailed into the sky. Excited chatter filled the cab as everyone ate chips and snacks, drank and laughed. *We did it. We actually did it!*

The brief moment with Marcus faded behind me like the lights from Chicago. He couldn’t hurt me now. I was safe.

Flint and I clasped one another’s hands as the moon shone brightly through my window. He kissed me on the mouth, his lips lingering. “We’re safe now, babe. Whatever Marcus does from here, we can handle it.”

I nodded even though I knew neither of us could guarantee that, but he was right about one thing. When we worked together, when our family functioned as one, we were formidable. And one thing I knew for certain: I was no longer a little girl trapped in that lab. I was strong and capable. When faced with my greatest fear, I overcame it.

“Let’s go home,” I whispered.

It was only as we reached cruising altitude that the large man stirred. A golden eye flickered open before he sat straight up in his chair.

His loud growl filled the cabin.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Flint jumped out of his seat and pinned the man's arms from behind, effectively restraining him in his seat.

It didn't stop him.

"Grab his legs!" Flint yelled.

The plane dipped as Jet shot out of his chair. He almost fell as the man growled and snarled. The man's legs thrashed as the twin tried to grab hold of him.

"Get the chloroform!" Di yelled.

Jasper also dove for the man's legs as Father pulled another bottle of chloroform from his bag. Di grabbed it and soaked a rag.

"Careful," Father said. "We can't let those fumes affect any of us!"

Di slowed her movements and kept the rag away from everyone before handing the bottle back to Father. He carefully screwed the top on.

"Hold him!" Di advanced on the large man.

Wild, golden colored eyes flickered around the cabin. His mouth opened, as if he were going to bite Di. She slapped the chloroformed rag over his mouth. A few seconds passed, and he slumped back into his seat.

"Good one, Di," Jasper murmured shakily.

Amber let out a squeak as Jacinda looked ready to faint. I took a deep breath as Greg's words carried from the cockpit. "Is everything okay back there?"

"Yes," Father replied. "It is now."

I eyed the small woman and the Brit. Both still slumbered quietly.

Di placed her hands on her hips. "That last dose should have kept him sedated for another few hours."

Father felt the large man's pulse and counted his respirations. "He's under now. We'll have to keep a close eye on him. He may be metabolizing the drug faster."

The earlier laughter and high floating through the cabin completely disappeared. The twins sat back in their seats, their beers forgotten. Jacinda,

Amber and Mica watched with blank expressions as Father and Di checked the other two.

It became real again what we'd done. Essentially, we'd kidnapped three individuals. When we'd planned it, we'd referred to it as a rescue, but we'd taken them unwillingly. In other words, not a rescue but a felony. I wasn't going to think about the explosion we'd caused. That would rocket our charges to an entirely new level if we were ever caught.

"Do you think we did the right thing?" I asked Flint. He collapsed back into the seat beside me.

"Do you really need to ask? Of course, we did the right thing."

I let his absolute conviction settle over me. If Flint wasn't worried that we'd broken laws, then I wouldn't be either. Flint was a rule follower. He always had been, but when we'd been in desperate situations, he'd broken rules if needed. I remembered that first morning I woke following my encounter with Aaron. Flint had stolen narcotics to keep my pain under control. He hadn't been proud of that, but he hadn't felt guilty either. It was what we'd needed to do to survive. If I really thought about it, our entire lives were based on broken rules. Father kidnapping us as babies was just the beginning.

I let out a sigh as my thoughts straightened themselves out. I no longer doubted what we had done.

"I guess now is as good a time as any to talk to Father."

Flint stood to let me pass.

Since Di still hunkered next to the three captives, I sat in her seat. Father turned tired eyes on me. "How are you doing, Galena?"

"I'm okay. A bit shook up, but I'm sure you'll understand why when I tell you what happened."

He frowned. "What happened?"

I summarized my encounter with Marcus and how I'd blasted him through the door with my energy ball. "I'm not sure if I killed him or not."

Father's expression didn't falter. "If you did, we'll know soon enough. His death would make national news. He comes from a very influential family." Father tapped his chin. "So we were spotted a few days ago?" he asked quietly.

"That's what Marcus said. That one of his *observers* thought he saw a few of us."

“Hmm.” Father’s expression grew grim. “We’ll need to lay low. No leaving home until I can learn more.”

The rest of the flight passed uneventfully. Di and Father continually monitored the new three, keeping a close eye on their respirations and oxygen levels using hand held pulse oximeters. Luckily, none of them stirred.

I could tell from their tense expressions that neither Di nor Father liked that the three were under anesthetic for so long, but there wasn’t another option. If any of them woke and became unruly, it could spell disaster. Images of the huge man waking and ripping the cabin door open, causing the jet to spiral out of control, flashed through my mind.

Yeah, better to keep them all unconscious.

I fell into an exhausted sleep somewhere over Missouri. Flint woke me a few minutes before landing. He leaned down and kissed me softly until I nuzzled into him.

“Wake up,” he said quietly. “We’re almost there.”

I stirred and stretched. A groan escaped me. My entire body hurt. Between the adrenaline rush from rescuing the new lost children, the strain of carrying unconscious bodies, the terrifying dreams of Marcus that had plagued my few hours rest, and the uncomfortable crick in my neck from sleeping in an upright seat, I felt like a train wreck.

I glanced up to find Flint staring out the window. A haunted, tight expression covered his features. I squeezed his hand, getting a brief, strained smile from him. I could tell that our night had taken its toll on him too. I had a feeling we’d all be waking up from nightmares for many nights to come.

After another painful stretch, I stood to use the bathroom. We were scheduled to land in a few minutes so I made it quick.

On the way back to my seat, I passed the captives. They still slept in their seats, slumped forward at unnatural angles. Jacinda would occasionally reach over and rearrange one of their heads or arms, while Father did checks on them every few minutes. A pensive gaze filled Jacinda’s eyes. I wondered if she’d been watching them the entire flight.

I watched her briefly as I stumbled back to my row. Jacinda’s eyes seemed drawn to the large male, the freakishly strong one with the golden eyes, again and again.

Since the man was sitting it was hard to tell, but from what I remembered in the warehouse, I guessed he stood around six four. Maybe taller. The width of his shoulders surpassed his seat back on both sides. Large hands rested on his thighs. They were as large as dinner plates. An image of him fighting Flint, Jasper and Mica flashed through my mind.

I shuddered and hurried back to my seat.

Fifteen minutes later, we were taxiing from the runway to our awaiting vehicles. The sun peeked above the horizon. It was the dawn of a new day. A day filled with so many unknowns of what these three would reveal.

The Suburban and Pathfinder waited exactly where we'd left them. It was hard to believe only a little over a week had passed since the day we'd left the desert fortress. So much had happened in that time.

The captives never stirred as we loaded them into the vehicles. Relief hung in our clouds. I could tell none of us liked drugging people against their will. All of us had experienced too much of that in our short lifetimes.

An hour later, we pulled through the security gates into the desert home. Bright morning sunshine streamed down and my stomach growled, protesting again at being neglected so much in the past twenty-four hours. The fizzy coke and bag of chips had long metabolized.

When I stepped out of the Suburban, the feel of the sun on my face and scents from the dry desert helped calm my nerves. All of us looked, and I'm sure felt, exhausted. More than anything, I wished for that month long trip with Flint. I knew now what people referred to when they said they needed a vacation.

Greg had flown away as soon as we'd disembarked from the airplane. It was once again me and my family. We all carried luggage in while Flint carried the new three. He deposited them on the couches in the living room. Di and Father quickly went to work, assessing them again, except doing it more thoroughly this time since they could actually inspect them more easily here.

"Do you know who they are?" I asked Father. I had a feeling he and Di already had this conversation, but I hadn't been privy to it.

Father frowned, studying them carefully. "No."

The three slept soundly through their exams. There were numerous scars and recent puncture wounds, probably from injections, but that was it.

The real damage, it appeared, was confined to their minds. Now the question was, how in the world did we help them?

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

It wasn't until late morning that one of them stirred.

By that time, all of us had showered and changed. We'd taken turns watching them while chugging coffee to stay awake. Amber was the first to notice that the chloroform was wearing off. She called Flint and the twins since it was the big one, the large man with the caramel colored unruly mane who was waking up. We had him in restraints, but nobody was confident they'd hold him.

None of us knew how he would react to what we'd done, and if he got angry, it could get ugly. Fast. Flint and the twins tensed.

Flint clenched his hands into fists. "If need be, I'll grab him first. I'll take him from behind. Each of you grab a leg. Channel relaxing feelings to him if he gets aggressive."

"Copy that," Jet replied.

Jasper fidgeted on the balls of his feet. "He's strong, Jet, stronger than Flint."

"Well, shit," Jet muttered.

"Babe?" Flint said as the large man moaned. "Can you be on standby?"

I readied an energy ball. It was hard since I was so tired. A small one formed after my third attempt, but it was strong enough to do what I needed. "I'll knock him out again if I have to, but I'm only going to as a last resort."

Flint nodded curtly. "Good."

Everyone else gathered behind us. Di, Jacinda, Amber and Mica stood back. Father waited in the corner, his eyes worried. Bright sunlight streamed into the room. The smaller man and long haired woman still slumbered on the other couches. Thankfully. If all three woke at once, we'd probably have to chloroform one of them again.

Amber lifted her nose. "He's awake!"

The man abruptly bolted upright, his eyes bright, clear, and that strange golden color. Something in his gaze flickered. Something that didn't look entirely human. With a deft turn of his head, his gaze narrowed.

"Who the hell are you people?" he growled. His gaze swiveled around, but he made no move to stand.

I breathed a sigh of relief that he hadn't lunged at anyone. Both twins fixed their gazes on him, a concentrated sheen in their eyes. *Ah, so that's why he's calm*. I kept my energy ball ready, just in case.

"Who are you people?" the man asked again.

I was the first to respond.

"We're all like you." I still stood a safe distance away. "You probably don't remember us, but fifteen years ago, this man," I nodded toward Father, "took us out of O'Brien's research facilities and hid us deep in the Colorado wilds. All of us were experimented on, like you were until Conroy got us out."

At the mention of experiments, the man growled. Actually *growled*. Definitely not human. Mica's eyes widened, and Amber stepped back. Jacinda cocked her head, that pensive expression on her face again.

The man tensed and eyed his restraints. He lifted his head and sniffed the air. Another guttural sound emerged from him. "Someone's breeding."

He turned and met Jacinda's gaze.

Her eyes widened.

A slow, suggestive smile grew on his face while Jacinda flushed as red as a tomato. I guessed by *breeding*, he meant that one of us was ovulating. Apparently, Jacinda.

"You can smell that?" Amber asked.

His face whipped toward her. She muffled a squeak and took a step back. The man studied her for a moment. The silence was deafening.

He sniffed the air again, this time in Amber's direction. "Can't you smell it? You can smell things, right?"

Amber's eyes widened as did the rest of ours. "You know that too?"

The man's gaze flickered across us before he nodded.

"But how?" Amber asked.

The man again looked around the room, as if sizing all of us up. That realization made me squirm.

Finally, he reached a hand for his head, or tried to. The restraint stopped him. With a violent wrench, he ripped his arm free.

So much for that holding him.

The man tapped his head, the restraint dangling from his wrist. “I can see it. Up here.”

Up here? From the looks of it, none of us knew how to interpret that.

“So you believe me when I say we’re all like you?” I said. “Because you can see that we’re different?”

“Yeah.” The man leaned back on the couch. He ripped his other arm free and then stretched his arms behind him and rested them on the couch’s frame. The ropes continued to dangle from his wrists like a hangman’s noose gone wrong. His arms were so long, they extended the length of the sofa. His gaze flickered between us again, that predatory gleam still there, although his body seemed entirely relaxed.

The twins’ features had returned to normal. Both had crossed their arms. Their faces twitched. It was obvious they were no longer manipulating the man’s emotions, although they appeared to be discussing him telepathically.

I breathed a sigh of relief. At least the man wasn’t violent. Of all the ways I thought this guy would act upon waking in a strange house, out of a lab, over a thousand miles from the facility he grew up in, especially after how violent he’d been initially—this was *not* it.

“But don’t you have questions or something?” Mica blurted. “I mean, seriously, dude. We just broke you out of a subterranean research facility that you spent your entire life in. Isn’t this the first time you’ve seen daylight?” She waved toward the floor to ceiling windows and the beautiful mountain desert.

The man glanced at the view. “No.”

“So you weren’t always kept in that cell?” I asked.

The man shook his head. “They let us out sometimes, on experimental excursions. I spent several months a year outside running.”

“Running?” Mica raised her eyebrows.

“With the wolves,” the man replied.

Wolves? Um sure, why not. “You’re saying they let you go free?” I said.

The man’s gaze hardened. “Not really. They tracked me so they could watch and study me.”

“Why did they want to watch you with wolves?” Amber asked.

“I can turn into one.”

For a moment, everyone was speechless. Then Mica said incredulously. “You’re a *werewolf*?”

“No, there’s no such thing as werewolves.”

“But you said you can turn into one,” Mica persisted.

The man shrugged. “You can call me a werewolf if you want, but that’s not technically what I am.”

None of us said anything for at least ten seconds. The silence was so thick it felt like solidified pudding. Father was the first to speak.

“Your drug was manufactured with lupus DNA.” Father’s eyes widened as recognition filled his face. “You’re Luke!”

The man nodded. “So they say.”

Amazement filled Father’s face. “You were around eight years old the last time I saw you.”

Luke’s head cocked. He studied Father and then all of us. “So you really *did* take your entire group when you escaped?”

Father nodded. His cloud once again grew heavy with guilt. “I’m sorry. I couldn’t take all of you. There were too many.”

Luke took a deep breath. “I thought about you all for a long time after we heard some escaped. I wondered where you went and what happened to you.”

“If I could have come back for you, I would have,” Father said.

“I know you would have,” Luke replied. “You were the nice one.”

Everyone grew quiet again. It wasn’t until Amber spoke that the silence broke. “How did you know I could smell things?”

Luke shook himself, his sad expression disappearing. “I told you. It’s up here.” He tapped his head again.

Amber let out an exasperated sigh. “But what does that *mean*?”

“I can read into people, see things about them. I can see that you’re all different, like me.”

“Like mind reading or something?” Jasper asked.

“Kind of like that,” Luke replied.

I shifted my vision. Luke’s brightly colorful cloud appeared. I wondered which color represented the drug that gave him his psychic abilities. Perhaps several of them did. I snapped my gaze back to normal.

Jet crossed his arms. “But what does that have to do with you being a wolf?”

“It doesn’t. It’s another alteration they made on me when I got older. The others they gave that drug to died.”

Uneasy expressions sprouted on everyone’s faces. Once again, I was reminded of how horribly cruel Project Renatus was.

“If you could see into us, why did you fight us when we tried to get you out of O’Brien?” Jasper asked. “Couldn’t you see we were there to help you?” Jasper held up his arm, displaying the ugly bruise that had formed from where Luke grabbed him.

“You woke me out of a sound sleep. Haven’t you heard that saying, *Never poke a sleeping wolf?*”

“I think that’s a sleeping bear,” Mica replied tartly.

Luke shrugged. “Same thing.”

I nodded toward the other two who were still sleeping. “Do you know them?”

“Yeah. We’re all that’s left.”

Di crossed her arms. “What are their names?”

“Edgar and Susannah.”

“Can you tell us anything about them, so we can help them when they wake up?” Di asked.

“That one,” Luke pointed at the Brit, “he’s part otter, and she’s part eagle.”

Jet’s head snapped back. “Eagle?”

The woman sleeping on the couch was so waifish and benign looking. If I hadn’t seen her in action, I’d have assumed she was completely docile.

“Yeah,” Luke said. “Don’t piss her off. Her fingers can turn into talons and she knows how to use them.”

I cocked my head. “Then why didn’t she claw us when we tried to take her from the warehouse?”

“Drugs. They drugged all of us every day so we couldn’t transform, but those drugs are wearing off now.” Luke grinned. “See?”

We all turned. The woman’s eyes were open. Cobalt blue irises blazed from her thin face. She bolted upright. A sharp scream emitted from her mouth. It was ear piercing, like the scream of an eagle. She lunged from the couch, her hands up, fingers growing into talons as I jumped back.

I tripped over the coffee table, falling to the ground.

She leaped right at me.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

I blasted her with an energy ball before she landed on me. I didn't think about it. The ball formed the second I knew I needed one. That had never happened before.

The woman shot across the room and smacked into the wall before crumpling into a heap on the floor.

My mouth dropped. *What have I done?*

In a flash, Flint stood in front of me, blocking me from the woman. Protecting me. Always protecting me.

Energy poured off Flint. It was so hot, I could almost taste it. It was crazy how in tune I was becoming with the energy fields around everyone. Lately, I didn't need to switch my vision to harness the fields. I could *feel* them. When we first met in August, it was no wonder nobody had ever noticed the energy off Flint. I hadn't known at the time that it was my *ability* that allowed me to feel it.

"Are you okay?" Flint asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine." I got to my feet.

The woman still lay on the floor. I cringed. I hoped I hadn't hurt her.

"That was impressive." Luke no longer sat on the couch but stood over me.

I had to crane my head up to see him. He was taller than Flint. Huge shoulders lifted when he put his hands on his hips. I could only imagine how big of a wolf he made.

"Thanks for the warning," I muttered.

"No problem."

Luke walked over to Susannah and picked her up. She was small and emaciated, reminding me of how I'd looked during my homeless days. She didn't appear healthy and apparently didn't weigh much either, or perhaps it was simply Luke's immense strength. Luke looped an arm around her waist and carried her back to the couch.

Father hurried to her side. He checked her head and back. She didn't appear to be bleeding.

"Is she okay?" I asked.

Luke shrugged. "Probably. She gets knocked out a lot. She's used to it."

I didn't know if he was being serious or sarcastic. Luke grinned, wolfishly. Smiling like that, I could tell he was part lupine.

Father frowned at Luke's words. "I can't find any obvious injuries. We'll have to see how she feels when she wakes."

Di crossed her arms. "Any suggestions to keep her calm when she wakes again?"

"Nope," Luke replied. "You'll probably have to restrain her. That's what they did in the lab."

He spoke of everything at O'Brien so candidly and calmly. I couldn't tell if it was a coping mechanism or if the way they'd grown up wasn't as traumatic as we'd all feared. He did say he ran in the wild several months a year. Granted, he was monitored the entire time, but still, he'd been outside and *free*. Surely, that helped, at least a little.

"Do we need to worry about him?" Jet pointed at the other guy.

Edgar was the smallest male in the house, which didn't mean he was small, by any means, since the twins were built like wrestlers and Flint and Luke like Mack trucks, but he was the shortest. His ebony skin was clean and smooth, however. He seemed much healthier than Susannah.

"No, he's usually pretty calm," Luke replied. "Especially if you get him in water. That settles him right down if he's riled up."

We all sat back down, everyone on the edge of their seats, bodies tensed. Jacinda kept eyeing Luke. She'd been strangely quiet since he woke.

A little while later, Edgar and Susannah roused again. This time, however, we had the woman restrained. Edgar merely glanced around warily, pushing back into the sofa as he groggily opened his eyes. His gaze grew narrow and confused as he scanned the room. When he saw Luke, his tense shoulders relaxed, at least a little. He cleared his throat.

"Are you gonna hurt me?" he asked warily, his words lilted in a strange accent.

Di's face softened. "No. We're here to help."

FIVE WHOLE DAYS passed with all of us living together. Since Father didn’t want us leaving the house, it gave the twelve of us plenty of time to get to know one another.

Each day we scanned the Chicago news for details on O’Brien. Since nothing was reported on Marcus on any channel, we knew that he lived. I wasn’t sure if that was a good thing. While I didn’t want murder on my conscience, I also knew that Marcus would never let us live in peace.

The official report hadn’t been released on the explosion. It would probably be months before that happened, but so far, there was no mention of our names or pictures of us. I could only hope it stayed that way.

As for us adjusting to Luke, Susannah and Edgar—in a way, it was as if we lived in a different country. Some of the behaviors and customs of our newest family members were completely foreign. Regardless, we slowly adjusted to the addition of them. It was strange, living with people who were part animal.

I’d often watch Susannah. She seemed to like spending her time on the balcony, perched on the railing. Literally. She’d hop onto it, her toes lengthening into talons as they curled around the railing to keep her in place. She’d sit like that for hours, smelling the breeze, cocking her head at unnatural speed when she seemed to detect movement below. Even though she’d sit like that with only her toes transformed, her behavior was clearly anything but human.

A few times she transitioned into a bald eagle. I never saw the actual transformation, but she was hard to miss once she was flying. For one, she was huge. Her wingspan had to be at least twelve feet. She dominated the skies. Smaller birds and vultures disappeared when she soared above. She was breathtaking to watch.

Luckily, her aggressive anger when she’d woken initially in the living room was short lived. Once Luke explained to her what happened and who we were, she calmed right down. She wasn’t exactly loquacious, however. For the most part, she kept to herself and would spend hours outside listening to sounds and smelling the fresh desert air. Sometimes I’d catch a smile on her face. She seemed content, as if all she ever wanted was to be free.

It made me wonder how much human was left in her and how she would ever live in society. Given how she acted right now, it didn’t seem

likely she would ever fit into the normal world. But that was a problem we would have to solve another day.

Edgar on the other hand, seemed more human than otter. Luke was right about the water. Edgar took baths a couple times a day, spending hours at a time in the tub. Apparently, he wasn't allowed to do that in the warehouse, but since he could do as he pleased now, that was where he chose to spend a lot of his time. He said it made him feel calm and happy.

"Like a 'lil kid a' a candy store," he said with a smile.

Another strange thing about him? He spoke with a cockney accent. None of us knew why. Luke would shrug, saying Edgar had always been a bit peculiar. Apparently, being British was the nationality Edgar decided he identified with after watching Mary Poppins as a little kid.

As for Luke, he had asserted himself into our group as if he'd been with us from the beginning. Of the three we had rescued, he seemed the most normal and our only hope of learning anything about O'Brien. Neither Susannah nor Edgar would talk about Marcus, Albert or the pharmaceutical company. The few times we tried to talk to them about it, they had shut down like virus infected computers, their faces blank and quiet. Father instructed us to not ask them again. He felt their psyches were fragile. I had to agree. Too much added pressure and one of them could crack.

Thankfully, Luke was not fragile. When we asked him about Marcus, he got growly and his eyes flickered, but he still answered all of our questions. From what he told us, Marcus was still actively involved in Project Renatus. However, there was no talk of kidnapping new children. Apparently, the new CEO of O'Brien Pharmaceuticals didn't share the beliefs of his father, the man who'd been CEO when Father, Marcus and Albert began the project. The current CEO forbid any further progression of Project Renatus. It was the only reason Marcus and Albert hadn't continued kidnapping and experimenting on more children over the years.

"So it was just Marcus visiting you for the past few years?" Di asked one night.

It was dark out. I craned my head to look out the dining room window. Susannah was on the balcony again while Edgar was down the hall with Amber watching a movie. The rest of us sat around the dining table, getting more info out of the werewolf. Even though he wasn't a werewolf, that's what all of us had taken to calling him since he didn't seem to mind. It was

certainly easier than calling him a *genetically enhanced lupine male* or whatever Father had said Luke's file was labeled.

Luke nodded. "The other ones, three guys and a woman, stopped coming to the lab years ago."

Father rattled off who those people were. "They were all in Marcus' group. They were his assistants. So as Project Renatus became dormant, fewer and fewer researchers were allowed into the warehouse?" Father asked Luke.

"Yeah, at least from what I could gather. For the past few months, there were only two guards with us. There used to be more. It seemed with each passing week, fewer people came in."

"What about Albert Darlington?" Father asked.

"Albert who?"

"The man in charge of the elemental group?"

"Oh, that guy. He disappeared years ago after his entire group died. Those kids were given more drugs than any of us. None of them could hold up to them."

Father paled. With shaky fingers, he pinched the bridge of his nose.

Since I barely remembered anyone from the other groups, I didn't actually know who had died. Father, however, did. For all I knew, he had helped find those ten kids that Albert had experimented on.

"When . . ." Father cleared his throat. "When did the last . . . child die in that group?"

Luke scratched his chin. A few days' worth of stubble coated it. It sounded like scratching sandpaper as he rubbed his cheeks. "Hmm . . . had to have been at least ten years by now. Weren't there only seven or eight kids left in Albert's group when you disappeared with your group?"

Father nodded. "Two died in one month after Albert gave them all the same drug. That's when I knew I needed to get everyone out."

Luke's eyes flickered. "The rest died within a year or two after you left. Albert kept drugging them."

For a brief moment, a memory came crashing back. It was of Flint and me watching *Breaking Bad* in the barn behind our cabin in the Forbidden Hills. It was a recent memory. I'd been nineteen, Flint twenty-three. Father had bought all five seasons of the show for us to watch. Scratchy hay rubbed against our limbs on a warm summer night as we cuddled in front of the laptop. We had been on season two, and the episode was about the little

redhead boy, living with his drug addicted parents in their filthy home. His parents would leave him for days at a time as they combed the streets for their next hit.

Images of that filthy boy swirled through my mind. Perhaps that was how we lived before Father kidnapped us from our neglectful, abusive parents.

I hated the word, *kidnapped*. It made what Father did sound so vile and evil. Father was anything but that, although Marcus and Albert seemed to represent those words quite well. But still, who knew how any of us would have ended up—living in circumstances like the ones we were born into. I often thought about it. What kind of adults would we have been? Drug addicts too? Inflicted with horrible mental illness from all of the horrific abuse we'd have suffered? Perhaps brain damaged or heavily scarred from the physical blows our parents had dealt us?

It didn't justify what Father, Marcus and Albert had done. They had stolen us and drugged us. There was nothing noble about that. In a way, it was simply exchanging one form of abuse for another. I shivered as I remembered those cold underground rooms in the subterranean level. Our deplorable homes above ground had only been exchanged for cold ones underneath.

However, it had been Father's hope that we would all have better lives. All thirty of us. Not just those of us in his experimental group. If Marcus and Albert had not been so bent on forming the perfect drug, if they had been more interested in helping the children under their care flourish into healthy, capable adults with enhanced abilities, it could have turned out so much better.

All of them could have turned out like us. Healthy. Happy. Whole.

My heart clenched at the thought of those children dying in that place. It was wrong. So, very, very wrong. Albert and Marcus needed to pay. We needed to stop them from hurting anyone ever again.

"I'll be back in a minute." Father stood and walked out of the room, his arm trailing along the wall as if to steady himself. Grief made his cloud flow heavily behind him.

I watched him go as another thought struck me. Perhaps Project Renatus was never intended to give us better lives as the project's pioneers. Perhaps that had only been Father being naïve and foolish. Originally, the entire purpose of Project Renatus had been to derive drugs that made

humans better . . . *more*. Those drugs were intended to be sold privately, marketed to the rich and elite. Only, that goal was unattainable. Ultimately, adults could not survive the drug's demands. With that downward descent, the project grew out of hand. Marcus and Albert had basically turned into mad scientists. Desperate to create the perfect human, they'd become drunk on their own ambition, experimenting on children at any cost. Only Father's intentions stayed pure.

Flint watched Father leave. Flint's expression was hard, his cloud unforgiving. It still saddened me that his opinion of Father hadn't changed. I thought maybe, just maybe, he'd start to view Father differently, but if there was one thing Flint was good at—it was not forgiving those who'd hurt him.

Nobody said anything after Father disappeared. Luke's eyes would flicker every now and then as he drummed his fingers against the table. Faint noise from the movie Amber and Edgar watched occasionally drifted into the room. Everyone else sat quietly, staring out the windows or looking lost in thought.

Mica finally broke the silence when she stood. "I'm gonna get a drink. Anybody want one?"

Jet's eyes lit up. "Is it alcoholic?"

"It can be," Mica said.

"Count me in," Jet replied.

Jasper stood. "Let's see what else the cellar holds." The three of them left the kitchen, their footsteps trailing down the stairs as they descended to the basement.

That left me, Flint, Di, Jacinda and Luke in the dining room. Jacinda watched the latest newcomer with sideways glances. If I didn't know her so well, I wouldn't have noticed her curious stares at Luke. However, I wasn't the only one who picked up on it.

"Something you'd like to know?" Luke asked in a deep voice. A small smile tugged on his lips. He turned his golden eyes on Jacinda.

My sister visibly jumped.

"Oh, um, I . . ." she stammered.

Luke turned his upper body toward her and draped an arm over his chair. His massive chest and shoulders were practically the width of two chairs. His voice dropped. "Yes?"

Jacinda clasped her hands. A rosy pink filled her cheeks. “I was, ah . . . wondering how it is that you’re so . . . normal?”

“Normal?” Luke’s eyebrows rose.

Flint smiled. He put an arm around my shoulders as he, Di and I watched the exchange.

“You know,” Jacinda said. “You’re not like Edgar or Susannah.”

Susannah still perched on the railing, the cold winter breeze ruffling her long, black hair.

Jacinda pursed her lips. “They both seem rather . . . different from you. You know, quieter and less . . . well . . . less confident.” Her cheeks were now bright red.

Luke grinned, a glint coming into his golden eyes. “Well, beautiful, I was his favorite. Marcus treated me better than he did the others. Not nearly as much torture. Maybe that’s why I’m so *normal*.”

Jacinda blushed when he called her beautiful. Actually *blushed*. I’d never in my life seen Jacinda rattled by any man. It wasn’t until a second later, that I processed what he said.

My head snapped back. “Torture?”

Luke leaned back in his chair. “Albert especially, from what I remember. When the kids in his group started dying, he seemed to believe they were doing it on purpose. That they were dying to defy him.” He snorted. “What a crock. That guy was as bad as Marcus. Neither seemed to care when kids died, but Marcus did seem to like me for some reason. I never did find out why.”

I shuddered. The kids in Marcus and Albert’s group would have *definitely* been better off left on the streets.

“So I guess that’s why I’m *normal*. Four months or so every year, I got out to run. I think that’s why I’m not so whack-a-do. The others,” he nodded to where Susannah perched. “They only got out a few days here and there.”

“How cruel,” Jacinda frowned.

A noise sounded on the stairs. Mica, Jet and Jasper returned. Jasper carried a six pack of beer. So did Jet. They popped the tops off the beers and returned to their seats.

“What are you guys talking about?” Jet asked after taking a long swallow.

“Yeah, what’d we miss?” Mica’s fingers curled around some German beer with a name I couldn’t pronounce.

“Luke was telling us how Albert and Marcus tortured some of the kids in their groups.” Flint’s energy picked up, but his expression gave away nothing.

“Tortured?” Mica visibly flinched.

“But Luke got to run for a few months a year, outside,” I said. “He was free from O’Brien during that time. That’s why he’s normal.”

Luke met Jacinda’s gaze again. “If I’d known all I had to do was run to Colorado to find someone as gorgeous as you, I would have found you years ago.”

Jacinda swallowed audibly, a flush staining her cheeks.

Mica’s earlier horror seemed to die away as she laughed. She snorted a few times. “Luke, how can a wolf, who’s been held captive most of his life, be a womanizer?”

Luke’s eyebrows rose. “What’s a womanizer?”

Mica and the twins almost fell over laughing. I found myself smiling too, despite the horrors Luke so casually spoke of. The twins and Mica always had a way of lightening the mood.

“You’ve got some serious moves, bro.” Jet clapped Luke on the back.

Luke simply shrugged, as if he had no idea what they were talking about.

Footsteps sounded in the hallway. Amber burst into the kitchen.

“Guys!” Amber shrieked. “Quick! Come see this!” She turned on her heel and sprinted out of the room.

Our laughter and smiles died. We all rushed after her. She ran down the hall back into the theater. Edgar still sat on the couch, a bowl of popcorn sitting haphazardly in his lap. It looked about to spill at any second. Father appeared in the doorway too.

“What?” Father asked. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

“Look!” Amber pointed at the large screen on the wall. An image on the TV showed the burning warehouse in Chicago.

“Turn it back up,” Amber said to Edgar.

He fumbled with the remote. When it became obvious he had no idea how to use it, Di whisked it from his hands. A second later, the sound came on.

The images on the screen flipped back and forth to footage of the burning warehouse and O'Brien's headquarters. It was a news segment. A newscaster's voice talked in the background, highlighting the explosion.

Amber trembled in her seat. "I flipped the news on after our movie ended. This was on."

The image on the screen shifted back to the newsroom. An anchorwoman shuffled papers before saying, "Authorities are still looking for the group responsible for the explosion at O'Brien Pharmaceuticals last week. Video surveillance cameras showed this van—"

The screen flipped to a still image of the van we'd driven. A fuzzy picture of Di at the driver's seat was visible. My stomach sank.

"The woman driving has not been identified, but authorities believe as many as eight people were involved in the explosion and are asking the public to come forward with any information."

The camera shifted again, this time to a man in an expensive suit and tie. A scuffed bruise marred his cheek. Other than that, no one would ever guess he'd been thrown fifty feet from a building only six days ago.

I shuddered. Luke growled. Father's sharp intake of breath made me turn. My eyes widened when I saw Father's face. All color had drained from it.

Marcus stood in front of a building. A sign behind him read *O'Brien Pharmaceuticals*. Steel gray hair was expertly cut around his head, but his eyes were the same as they'd been six days ago. Cold and dead looking.

Marcus looked directly at the camera when the newscaster asked him what the company's reaction had been to the explosion.

He spoke in a cold voice. "Our company is working with authorities to track down the perpetrators. I have no doubt we'll find them, and when we do, justice will be served."

The cold way he uttered the words and the direct way he stared at the camera made me feel as if he was speaking directly to us.

His determined gaze and cold smile said one thing.

He was coming for us.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

A cold winter breeze rolled across my cheeks. The pitch black sky stretched above with its dazzling array of stars. Flint's warm side pressed against mine as we gazed upward.

The fountain had finally turned off. With its silent winter hibernation came a feeling of death and isolation. It was quiet now in the backyard. The only sounds were the wind, our breathing and the occasional shifting of pebbles beneath our blanket. Flint held me closely to his side. Ever since that news segment earlier this evening, a general feeling of anxiety had strummed in his cloud.

"He's not going to stop, is he?" I said quietly.

Flint took a deep breath. In that sound, I heard the weight of the world. "No."

I pushed up on my elbow and settled my chin on Flint's chest. Marcus' image kept swirling through my mind. First, the outline of him in the warehouse, his long trench coat swaying around his legs. Then, the image of him on TV when he promised to enact revenge. And last, a distant memory of him when I was a little girl. He'd held me down on a metal gurney before plunging a needle into my arm. His black menacing cloud had pulsed around him.

I shivered.

Flint wrapped his arms around me. I lay my cheek on his chest and listened to his strong heartbeat within. "We're strong, though. We can beat him. I'm not a little girl anymore and none of us are weak."

"I know."

I pushed up so I could see him again. "So why are you so worried? We rescued Luke, Susannah and Edgar. All of us escaped alive and well. And, every day we become more in tune with our abilities. We can beat him, Flint. I know we can."

He smiled and tenderly brushed a strand of hair from my face. "You're fearless and brave. I love that about you."

I snorted. “Fearless, not really, and brave . . . well, I’m still scared but I *know* we can do this.”

“Hmm.” He sighed heavily again.

“Have faith in us,” I said quietly. “Have faith in *me*. I can take care of myself. I finally know that. And while I may still lose things all of the time and want to do impulsive acts, I’m getting better. I don’t rush quite so headfirst into things, and I still know exactly where my birth control is. I think.”

He chuckled. “Are you saying that you didn’t leave it under your jeans on the bed this morning?”

“Is that where it is? I thought I left it on the bathroom sink by my toothbrush?”

“Just kidding. It’s still there.”

I smiled and playfully pinched his shoulder. “But in all seriousness, babe. We’re going to be okay. I’m not saying it’s going to be easy, but if we work together and function as a family—we can do this. And then . . . we’ll finally have what we’ve always wanted. A life, a real life, in the world where we act and live like everyone else.”

“I’d love to have that with you.”

“We will. Now, we just have to find a way to beat Marcus so that dream can come true.”

“Come here.” He pulled me back to his side. Some of the anxiety left his cloud. Love and hope now filled it too.

I settled against him as an eagle scream filled the air. Susannah soared above, her outline flashing across the moon. So many changes had happened within our family and so many challenges waited ahead, yet if there was one thing I learned—it was that as a family we were strong, and together we could do anything.

REBORN

The Lost Children Trilogy
Book Three

THE LOST CHILDREN SERIES—BOOK THREE

CHAPTER ONE

The bald eagle soared above. Her wings spanned twelve feet, almost double the size of a normal female. The eagle swooped to the ground in the surrounding desert, her magnificent wings cupping to slow her descent. Piercing, razor sharp talons opened. The rabbit didn't see her coming. Her approach was silent. Deadly.

Cold winter wind whipped my dark red hair around my shoulders. Di and I stood on the deck of our remote Northern Arizona home. Susannah continued to claw the rabbit in the desert, beyond the walled backyard.

Di crossed her arms. "Do you know how long it's been since she's transformed, Lena?"

"Over three days."

A brooding expression grew on Di's face. "That's the longest she's gone yet."

The air rustled her black locks. She'd cut it the other day, complaining that her hair was getting too long. Those midnight locks now sat perfectly shaped at chin length. The cut framed her oval face, complimenting her olive skin and dark eyes. The bob suited her personality. Sharp, severe and straight.

A shiver struck me. I wrapped my arms around myself. I hadn't grabbed a jacket when Di and I raced outside to watch Susannah fly overhead. "She's becoming more animal than human."

Di sighed heavily. "I know."

"That could be a problem. If we knew she'd never be spotted by the DNR or an astute bird watcher, we wouldn't have to worry. But she's too *big*. Someone's bound to notice, and if they choose to investigate, we could have trouble. No other eagle comes close to her size."

"You're right." Di's gaze didn't leave our newest family member.

In the distance, Susannah, in her eagle form, tore apart the now-dead rabbit. Her giant beak opened and ripped a chunk out of the animal. I imagined congealing blood dripping from the puncture wounds as she

pierced the hide, crimson drops falling into the Arizona desert sand. Susannah let out a sharp cry. With a few flaps, she climbed high into the sky. The rabbit dangled listlessly from her talons. Susannah grew smaller until she disappeared from view.

I didn't know where Susannah went when she fled to the mountains. Probably some place close to open water, since most eagles preferred dwellings by large lakes or rivers. The dry, open terrain around the house wasn't exactly eagle friendly. The desert also didn't give her many good places to perch. And while she'd sometimes return and perch on the home's deck railing, she was doing it less and less.

The impressive backyard, with its fifteen foot tall perimeter walls and expertly landscaped rock gardens, stretched in front of us. The grounds were huge. We had plenty of space to roam even though twelve of us lived in the house. However, Susannah frequented it less and less. A lot of times, it was just eleven of us.

I shivered again. It was the beginning of December. Each day the high mountain desert sent promises of snow in her chilly breeze and crisp mornings.

"Maybe being exposed is what we need." My teeth chattered. "If everyone knows about us, what harm can Marcus do?"

Di's eyes grew hard. "I won't be studied again. Doctors will want to study us."

Her tone was so vehement, I took a step back. "I don't want to be studied either, but in a way, I feel Marcus' threats are similar to blackmail. He doesn't want anyone to know what he and Albert Darlington did to us and the other lost children. They'll go to prison if they're discovered. But, if we expose ourselves, we take away that leverage and perhaps the repercussions won't be that bad. We're exposed, maybe studied, and Marcus is left with no reason to come after us. Everything would be out in the open. What could he do to us then?"

"Revenge."

I clenched my jaw, stopping my chattering teeth. She was right. A sane person would probably give up if he knew he'd lost the battle.

An image of Marcus confronting me in the warehouse only a week ago swirled in my mind. Those cold eyes. That baleful stare. From what I'd seen, Marcus wasn't sane. More like *Insane*, with a capital I. He didn't

seem to find anything wrong with entrapping people and mercilessly studying them.

“But we’re strong together. We can beat him. I know we can.” Somehow my tone wasn’t quite as convincing as it had been the other night. At that time, I’d tried to reassure Flint that we could handle Marcus, but suddenly, I wasn’t so sure.

Di’s lips pursed. She rubbed her arms. “Let’s go back in. It’s getting cold.”

We found everyone else, except for Mica, Jasper and Flint, in the home theater. Scents of popcorn filled the air. I guessed someone had watched a movie not too long ago. However, Father was currently replaying the news clip featuring Marcus. It had aired on TV the other day. He watched it with a frown, his arms crossed. As usual, he wore an expensive sweater and pressed slacks. Outside of the Forbidden Hills, Father never wore hiking gear. And despite looking like an aging grandfather, his mind was sharp.

The sound of Marcus’ voice filled the movie theater room. Goosebumps rose on my arms.

In the news clip, Marcus essentially promised to find us and enact revenge for what we’d done to O’Brien’s research facility. That facility had housed Project Renatus—the project under which we were experimented on as young children. That project gave us our extrasensory abilities.

Father had abandoned the project fifteen years ago in hopes of keeping us safe. He whisked the eight of us to the wilds of Colorado to live in hiding in hopes of avoiding Marcus’ wrath and O’Brien’s sadistic practices. And while most of us weren’t blood related, we considered each other family. It didn’t matter that Father wasn’t actually our biological parent. He was like a father to me.

For the past fifteen years, Father had done everything in his power to keep us safe. Now, our safety was in jeopardy. Choosing to rescue the new three—Susannah, Luke and Edgar—from O’Brien’s subterranean lab in Chicago had opened a door to a long dead world that Father thought we had escaped. Since returning from Chicago, we’d holed up in this house, trying to figure out what to do from here.

“Turn it off, Father,” Jacinda pleaded. “There’s nothing more we can learn.”

My half-sister, my only blood relation in our strange family, sat on the plush couch beside Luke. Jacinda’s long blond hair, supermodel looks and

coltish legs would draw anyone's eye. As always, she was breathtaking. However, she looked tenser than normal. Her eyes weren't as bright, and worry lined her lips. The stress of everything finally seemed to be catching up with everyone.

Father didn't seem to hear her, though. He pressed a button on the remote and watched the clip again from the beginning. Marcus' words and gaze chilled me as he stared at the news camera. He promised to find the perpetrators and hold them accountable for blowing up O'Brien's warehouse. His eyes were cold and dead looking. They were the eyes of a soulless man.

I remembered Marcus' cloud, not only from when I was four years old and imprisoned within O'Brien's cells but also from my encounter with him only a week ago. His aura, or cloud as I called them, was pitch black and scary looking. Marcus' cloud was as evil as they got. I still shuddered thinking about it.

A subtle wave of air drifted across my cheeks when the theater's door opened. Flint strode in, his broad shoulders and strong pectorals defined in his fitted T-shirt. His gaze warmed when he saw me. "Lena, there you are."

He slipped his arms around my waist. Spice, wood and tangerines fluttered to my senses. I'd know that scent anywhere. The anxiety that had been strumming through me abated. The safe feeling that Flint evoked folded over me, enveloping me in its warmth, like a soft cocoon welcoming me home.

"I've been looking for you." He leaned down and kissed my neck.

The intimate affection got an envious look from Amber and an amused one from Jet. The blue eyed, dark haired twin loved to tease me about Flint. Amber however, the youngest in our group, always watched us with longing.

Amber stole a glance at Edgar, her eyes darting toward him from under her pixie haircut.

Edgar sat beside her, his coffee brown skin as dark as chocolate, but he appeared oblivious to her questioning gaze.

"Where were you?" Flint asked.

I curled my fingers around his strong forearms. "Di and I saw Susannah flying overhead. We stepped outside to watch."

"She's still an eagle then." Flint let go after one last kiss on my neck. "Di?" he called. "Can I speak to you?"

Di left Father’s side and followed her brother out of the room.

I watched them go. I couldn’t believe I ever thought they were together. When I’d first re-met everyone in August, four months ago, I thought Di and Flint were dating from the way they secretly spoke and sought the other out.

Now, it was so obvious they were siblings—true blood relations. Both had naturally tanned skin from their Hispanic or Mediterranean heritage, dark eyes, tall builds and steely demeanors. The only real difference between the two was hair color. Di’s hair was midnight black whereas Flint’s was a beautiful chestnut brown. His thick hair curled around the edges. The soft feel of it made me ache to thread my fingers through it.

Of course, if Father hadn’t taken our memories away eight months ago, and sent all of us on a wild chase around the country searching for one another, I would have known Flint only ever wanted one person.

Me.

Flint and I had been close for as long as I could remember. He’d always been my best friend, but in the past three years, that friendship had evolved into a relationship that went deeper than anything I could have imagined.

I liked to think of myself as a woman who could stand on her own two feet. I think I proved I was more than capable of that, not only during my four months of homeless life, but also by dealing with Marcus single handedly at the warehouse last week. Still, if something happened to Flint, if for some reason he was taken from me . . .

“We have a problem.”

Father’s statement snapped me out of my thoughts. Father sat in front of his laptop at the bar behind the couch. Thankfully, he had turned the TV off while I’d been lost in my daydreams.

“What’s wrong?” Jacinda tensed.

“Marcus,” Father replied. “It seems he’s found my bank accounts.”

CHAPTER TWO

“Bank accounts?” Edgar cocked his head.

“What does that mean?” Luke growled. The new and biggest member in our family eyed my sister every now and then. Luke was huge, over six foot four and built like a two-ton truck. He could also transform into a wolf, and although he wasn’t a werewolf, for simplicity’s sake that’s what we had taken to calling him. Luckily, he didn’t seem to mind.

Father’s brow furrowed. “It means I don’t have access to any money in these accounts, at the moment at least.”

Fear grew in Amber’s gaze. “But why would he do that?”

Jet cocked a dark eyebrow. “Well . . . I may be completely off here but I’m guessing it has something to do with that little explosion we caused. Nothing like blowing up one’s building to cause a little feud. Or perhaps it’s because we freed his research subjects. Maybe that didn’t sit well with him either.” Jet raised his muscled arms, as if in surrender. “Like I said, only guessing on this one.”

Amber rolled her eyes. “Thank you, Mr. Comedian.”

The rest of us ignored Jet’s sarcastic jabs. This wasn’t a laughing matter.

As a former biomedical researcher for O’Brien Pharmaceuticals, Father had made millions from his chemical creations. However, he’d also been born wealthy. Money was something he’d always had.

My insides stilled at the thought of that safety line cut. We counted so much on Father’s immense wealth. It allowed us to do everything. Hide, travel, buy ridiculously expensive, but secure houses on a moment’s notice. Without those funds, then what?

I joined Father. The computer screen glowed in the dim room. From what I could see, he was right. His accounts were frozen. “Are you sure it’s Marcus behind this? Maybe the bank froze them for another reason.”

“No, it’s him,” Father said grimly. “I wondered if he would try to find my money first, before finding me. Now that he knows we’re all alive and

living in hiding, he'd have figured the only way that's possible is because of my resources. And since money is easier to find than us, he's going after that first." He sighed heavily.

At times like this, Father truly looked his age. Gray hair, sharp hazel eyes lined with wrinkles, a bulbous nose and a medium build didn't exactly scream genius researcher. The only advantage Father had? His looks were deceiving. Having taken the first generation drugs of the eight he had administered to us made him stronger than most men his age. His eyesight and hearing were that of a thirty-year-old, and he had an uncanny intuition to people's intentions, *but* he wasn't immortal.

He was still aging.

"I need to find Diamond." Father snapped his laptop closed, the sound magnified in the quiet room. "Do you know where she went, Galena?"

I shrugged. "With Flint somewhere."

Father left.

Everyone else watched him go, all except Mica and Jasper. I had no idea where those two were, but I guessed in one of their rooms doing something similar to what Flint and I had done that afternoon. Since I'd gone on birth control, Flint and I were once again a true couple in every sense of the word. Most of the time, we couldn't keep our hands off each other.

"What do you think that was all about?" Amber's large doe eyes grew wider.

"I'm not entirely sure," I replied.

Luckily, before Amber became really worked up, Edgar sidled closer to her side.

"No worries, love," he said in his peculiar Cockney accent. "Conroy'll sort i' out. Now, I 'fink we should watch an'oer flick. What you say, love?"

Amber smiled, a dark pink filling her cheeks. "Yeah, that would be fun. Do you want to pick one or should I?"

Edgar murmured something else. I didn't catch it, but I did hear the strange lilt in a few words. None of us had commented yet on Edgar's accent. Not even the twins. Considering Edgar had been born in Pittsburgh, not east London, his way of talking made no sense. It was even more bizarre since he'd grown up in O'Brien's research facility and had never traveled abroad.

However, according to Luke, Edgar had watched *Mary Poppins* as a child during one particularly brutal drug treatment. Luke explained that Edgar now identified with the British culture, subsequently adopting a hybrid accent. Father believed it was another defense mechanism—a way Edgar distanced himself from the horrors of O'Brien. *Mary Poppins* was safe and good, and safety and beneficence were something all children craved. Perhaps Edgar had mentally transported himself into the film during that hellacious treatment. A mental transportation he never emerged from.

Luke, Jet, Jacinda and I exited the room while Amber and Edgar surveyed the impressive DVD collection.

Once in the hallway, I closed the door behind us.

Jet crossed his arms, his large biceps bulging. "Is it as bad as it sounds?"

I took a deep breath and shrugged. "I don't know. I don't really know how it works when a bank freezes your accounts."

"Don't you need to go into the bank in person to clear it up?" Jacinda's brow puckered.

"I'm sure that's what Marcus is hoping for," Luke growled. "Why search the country for us when he can make us come to him?"

WE FOUND FATHER, Di and Flint in Father's study. A gas fire glowed in the fireplace, casting an eerie light in the dim room. Father sat at his desk. Di and Flint flanked his sides. Both looked over Father's shoulders at the computer screen.

"He's locked three of my seven accounts." Father frowned. "Luckily, my overseas banks have not been sabotaged so we're still all right."

I bit my lip. "Do we need to stop spending money?"

Father scratched his chin. "Not on everyday items, no, but at the moment, I don't have enough cash flow to purchase a secure home while also maintaining payments to my outside contacts. Acquiring money from my overseas accounts takes time."

My throat tightened.

"What are the chances he'll get to the overseas banks?" Di asked.

"Nearly impossible. Although, I would have said the same for my U.S. accounts last week, but obviously, he's found a way around that. I can't guarantee the same won't happen with the off shore banks as well."

I studied the screens. "How do you think he froze them?"

“Marcus is similar to me in some ways. He grew up in a wealthy, influential family. Both of us have friends in high places. My guess is, since the warehouse incident, he’s now focused one hundred percent of his time on finding us. He probably made a few calls and cashed in some favors.”

Flint’s eyebrows rose. “So we close those accounts and open new ones?”

“Or will that only guarantee to Marcus that he’s found Father’s money?” I countered. “What if he knows about the other ones and is waiting to see what we do? Then what?”

Father leaned back in his chair, his frown deepening. “I need to make a few calls. If you wouldn’t mind . . .”

I took the hint. Father always wanted privacy when he called outside contacts. Despite being adults, he still sheltered us from that side of his life. “Right, we’ll clear out.”

Luke, Jacinda and I readily headed toward the door, but Flint had to practically drag Di from Father’s side. Di worked more closely with Father than any of us. She truly was his right-hand man, or rather, woman.

I wrapped my arms around myself as we walked down the hall toward the living room. It felt as if an ominous presence followed, like Marcus was right at our heels. I actually had to make myself *not* look over my shoulder since I knew I was being ridiculous. Still, Marcus had found Father’s money so quickly.

“We should get dinner started.” Flint moved to my side, his hand brushing against my lower back.

Di’s midnight brows drew together. “Food is the last thing I’m concerned about.”

Flint shrugged. “I know, but we still need to eat.”

Luke put an arm around Jacinda’s shoulders, his massive forearm settling on her.

Jacinda jumped.

Luke just grinned. “It’ll be all right, beautiful. I’ll keep you safe. Nobody’s gonna mess with the big, bad wolf.”

Jacinda opened her mouth and then closed it. For a brief moment, my worry left me as I tried not to laugh. A blush actually stained my sister’s cheeks.

Di spun on her heel and retreated, probably to pace outside Father’s study. The woman was truly like a caged lion.

Flint nodded toward the kitchen. “Shall we?”

Flint steered me away while Luke continued wooing Jacinda. For once, my sister had met her match.

In the kitchen, Flint pulled out pans and ingredients from the fridge. We’d grocery shopped yesterday so there was plenty to choose from.

Flint worked calmly, as if the revelation about Father’s money had never happened. I, however, wrung my hands and stared at the stone countertops.

When Flint’s dark gaze met mine, he dropped the food on the counter and crossed the distance between us in one of his lightning fast moves.

The next thing I knew, steel arms were around me, his scent everywhere. I inhaled deeply. The familiar aroma of spice, wood and tangerines worked its magic. A feeling of safety followed. I wrapped my arms tightly around him and buried my face in his chest.

“What are we going to do?”

Flint bent his knees until we were at eye level. His dark irises, chestnut hair and olive complexion were all so familiarly sexy. “We’re going to unfreeze Conroy’s accounts, secure the rest of his money and go after Marcus.”

He said the words so casually, I chuckled.

His eyebrows rose. “What?”

“You act like it’s no big deal. That this is easily fixed.”

“I don’t know if I’d say easily, but we *can* fix this and we will.” He cocked an eyebrow. “Wasn’t it *you* the other day who was telling me we could beat Marcus? That together we’re strong?”

“I did say that.”

“Well, you managed to convince me. Where did that confidence go?”

His words helped relax my tense shoulders. We *were* strong. The rescue mission we initiated a week ago proved it. Together, we *were* formidable. Flint was right.

I stood up straighter and smoothed the curls from my face. I tucked a thick dark red strand behind my ear.

“Feeling better?”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

“Good, now let’s make supper.”

The rest of the night passed normally. Well, as normally as it could. We ate around the large dining table. But as much as everyone tried to act

as if everything was fine, a haze hung over us, dimming the mood and threatening to shatter the superficial feeling of safety. A part of me still felt assured. We were strong. We could beat Marcus. But the other part of me felt like that little girl trapped in O'Brien's cell: alone, helpless and afraid.

It was only as I stared out the window that I realized how vulnerable of a position we were in. If something happened, if Marcus somehow tracked us to this house based off something he found from Father's bank accounts, we'd have to leave. Immediately.

Yet, Susannah was missing. We couldn't leave her behind.

My fork clattered to my plate as that implication set in. "We need to find Susannah!"

CHAPTER THREE

Flint's hand sought mine. The energy around him kicked up a notch. Whenever something scared me, it was as if he knew. His energy responded and flowed out of him. Energy only I could feel.

"If something were to happen. If Marcus were to track us to this house, we'd need to leave. Susannah would be left behind." My voice shook.

"You're right," Father said quietly.

Jacinda's eyes widened while Mica audibly swallowed a large bite of salmon. Her normally cheerful demeanor darkened. "How the heck are we gonna find her?" Mica took a large gulp of water. "She's been gone, what? A couple of days?"

The floor to ceiling dining room windows created a mirrored effect in the room. Our images stared back.

"I can find her." Luke's deep voice rumbled.

"How?" Di asked sharply.

"I'll track her."

Amber cocked her head. Of the original eight of us, Amber was the best at tracking, thanks to her enhanced olfactory sense. "Have you tracked her before?"

Luke nodded. "It's one of the experiments they had me do. They wanted to see how good my tracking abilities were."

"But how can you track her if she doesn't leave a scent on the ground?" Mica ripped a bite off her dinner roll. A few crumbs fell on her plate.

"I don't use just scent." Luke made a tapping movement on his head. "It's all up here."

Mica rolled her brown eyes. "That again?"

It wasn't the first time Luke had alluded to his extrasensory abilities that bypassed the five senses. When we'd first met him last week, he'd known about Amber's heightened sense of smell before we told him, as if

he saw it inside her. He obviously had abilities similar to Di. Psychic abilities.

"So how do you track her?" Jasper asked. The twin looked skeptical, his arms crossed.

"I told you, it's up here." Luke tapped his head again.

Mica sighed in exasperation. "Yeah, but what does that *mean?"*

"It means I can see her, if I hone in on her. I get glimpses into what she's thinking and feeling, and I'm able to see through her eyes for brief periods of time. It's like she pops up on my radar. I sense where she is."

Flint raised an eyebrow. "But how does that allow you to find her?"

"The connection is kind of like a magnet. It tells me which direction to go. I just follow it."

Amber's head cocked. "So you don't use scent?"

"I do use scent, but that's only part of it. If someone's over fifty miles away, their scent's too faint. Then, I just use what's up here." He tapped his head for the third time.

"I can track up to a hundred miles by scent," Amber said.

Luke's eyebrows rose. "That's impressive."

I leaned forward in my seat. "But how did you know that Amber could smell things? When we first met?"

"It was a feeling I got off her. It's like . . . I knew. I don't know how else to describe it."

"Interesting." Di tapped her chin.

Jacinda leaned forward too. "So is it only Susannah you can track?"

Luke's caramel-colored hair ruffled his shoulders when he shook his head. "I could track Edgar too. And I've been with all of you long enough, I may be able to track you as well."

Father took a sip of his wine before standing. "Can I leave the ten of you to find her tomorrow? I need to leave for a few days, to clean a few things up."

My stomach fluttered. Susannah was missing. Father was leaving. Our finances hung in the balance. I sat up straighter. We all knew things wouldn't be easy after we rescued Luke, Susannah and Edgar. Now, we had to step up to the plate. There was no way to hide from our new lives.

I nodded. "We'll find her."

DI'S TALL FORM moved back and forth in front of the floor to ceiling windows, her arms crossed as she paced. The early morning desert sky stared back. It was only six in the morning. A beautiful, pink and orange glow stretched along the horizon.

I'd tossed and turned all night, wondering where Susannah was, wishing we had an easy way to call her back. But we had no way to do that. Our only hope was Luke.

I jumped up from the couch. "Let's wake Luke up."

My statement stopped Di's pacing. She placed her hands on her hips. Black pants and a long-sleeved black sweater covered her tall frame. "I'm giving him five more minutes, then I'll wake him up."

Jacinda fiddled with her turtleneck. She stood by the cold, empty fireplace. "Do you really think he can find her?"

Jasper shrugged. "He claims to be able to."

"Right now, he's the only chance we have." Flint's deep voice carried through the cavernous room.

"But can he, that's the real question." Jet raised a skeptical eyebrow.

"Of course I can." Luke's voice made Mica and Edgar jump. He appeared from around the corner, looking freshly showered. His massive shoulders filled the hall. A hint of aftershave wafted in the air as he trailed past the couch.

Jet tapped his watch. "About time, wolf. Did you not get the memo we wanted to set out early?"

Luke's golden eyes flickered to the windows. The night had only just ended. "How early did you mean?"

His serious question got a laugh out of Jet. "Just messin' with you, bro."

"Let's get a move on." Di pulled her jacket on. "If Susannah's flown somewhere remote, it may take all day to find her."

WE ALL STOOD outside, waiting for Luke while he transformed. It was freezing out. Not literally, the temp hovered in the forties, but there was a biting wind that made my eyes water. I pulled my scarf tightly around my face.

Four wheelers and dirt bikes were parked at our sides. More things left behind by the previous celebrity owner. Our plan was to follow Luke if he

was able to catch Susannah's trail. I hoped the vehicles had enough gas to go the distance.

Flint stood beside me. The rest of the group huddled around. Luke had disappeared behind the house after instructing all of us to stay put. A few minutes had passed since then. I shuffled from foot to foot, wishing I'd put on thicker socks. I was about to go back inside to get a new pair when a shriek snapped my head up.

Amber's hand flew to her mouth. Her eyes bulged.

I followed her gaze and swallowed a yelp.

A huge, tawny colored wolf padded toward us. He was quite simply, the largest wolf I'd ever seen. If I hadn't known it was Luke, I would have bolted for the house. At his shoulders, he had to be close to four feet tall, and the razor sharp canines that poked out of his mouth looked entirely deadly.

"Whoa," Jet muttered.

"No shit," Jasper agreed.

Luke approached as silently as a bat flying at night. He brushed against Jacinda and chuffed.

Of all of us, Jacinda appeared the least apprehensive. She tentatively ran her fingers through his coat.

A low contented growl emitted from Luke.

Amber stepped forward eagerly. "What's he feel like?"

Jacinda stroked his fur again. "Soft."

Bundled up in a puffy jacket and knee high winter boots, Amber's eyes shone brightly with excitement. She looked like a kid experiencing her first Christmas. She threaded her fingers through Luke's fur. "Wow. He *is* really soft."

Luke made another noise, and if I didn't know better, also rolled his eyes.

The twins put their hands on their hips. Dark, curly hair peeked out from under their hats. Their bright blue eyes looked amused. Twitches, raised eyebrows and a few chuckles followed. Telepathy wasn't subtle.

"Okay, ladies," Jet drawled. "As fun as this petting zoo is, we have work to do, remember? Luke said he's going to find Susannah."

"Yeah," Jasper added. "Let's see if he actually can."

Luke licked Jacinda's free hand before he lifted his head. He exhaled forcefully, closed his eyes and then inhaled. He did that a few times before

whining and taking off at a trot toward the gate.

We all jumped onto the four wheelers and dirt bikes. Once we exited the massive enclosed backyard, Luke took off at a lope.

We revved our engines. Sand and dirt kicked up around the tires. The twins and Di rode the dirt bikes. The rest of us sat on four wheelers.

It reminded me of Hideaway Hills, when we rounded up cattle. On the easier terrain, Pete and the cowboys rode four wheelers, only using horses for the harder to navigate mountainous region. A brief twinge of nostalgia filled me as I remembered Pete and Val. We hadn't talked to them since leaving all those weeks ago. An ache formed in my chest every time I thought about them, but we all agreed it was too dangerous to contact them. With Marcus hunting us, the last thing we wanted was to put the ranching couple in jeopardy. If Marcus knew about them, he could use them as leverage. I'd surrender myself to Marcus in a second if I knew it would keep Pete and Val safe.

Thankfully, Luke moved fast which meant I had to concentrate on driving versus reminiscing about our previous home. The werewolf didn't slow when cacti, rocks and hills got in the way. It was hard to keep up with everyone, since I wasn't used to driving a four wheeler.

Flint, of course, stayed by my side. At our first particularly rough piece of terrain, he drove ahead and tried to guide me through it. After catching my irritated expression, he chuckled and pulled back.

I grinned and pushed through the terrain until I got the hang of it.

Despite my inexperience, I wanted to laugh as we chased Luke through the desert. Cold, winter air bit into my cheeks. My lungs constricted from the brisk temperature. The feel of the wind against my face, and the comradery of us all whooping and riding together infused adrenaline into my body.

We kept up the pace until we entered the mountains. We were truly miles away from the house and no longer on Father's property. Nobody was out here. It was too remote. The nearest town was at least fifty miles away.

Luke stopped every now and then, to do his exhaling and inhaling thing. I guessed he was scenting for Susannah, although I had no idea how much he could actually smell given the distance we had covered. I figured part of it triggered his extrasensory ability, whatever that was.

When we reached the tree line, Luke stopped again. This time, he put his nose to the ground, pawed the pine needles and whined. Abruptly, he

took off again and raced through the trees.

It was harder to keep up with him in the forest. Luke loped easily through the pines, but the wider four wheelers didn't move as well.

Edgar got stuck between two trees. Amber, Jacinda, Jet and I stopped to help, but Luke kept going. The four of us waved everyone else away.

"Just keep up with him," Jet called. "We'll stay here and try to get him out."

Flint's gaze drifted to the area where we'd last seen Luke. "Mica, do you want to ride with me? We need your sight right now."

Mica jumped off her four-wheeler before climbing on behind Flint.

"Which way?" Flint asked.

Mica raised her arm and pointed. "There."

Flint gave me a questioning glance.

I shook my head. "I'm going to stay here too. You guys go."

He nodded curtly and gunned the engine. A brief scent of pine kicked up before they peeled out. Di and Jasper followed on the dirt bikes. The rest of us stayed put.

As the sound of their engines grew fainter and fainter, the sounds of the forest slowly returned. Rock squirrels scampered about, a woodpecker hammered above and wind whistled through the trees.

"Let's get this thing out." Jet surveyed Edgar's four wheeler. He tugged sharply.

It didn't budge.

"Let me help," Amber said.

She and Jet both pulled on the machine. It squeaked against the trees but didn't move.

"Want me to give it a try?" I offered.

"By all means." Jet bent over in a mocking bow.

I rolled my eyes. "You might want to stand back. Just to be safe."

Edgar moved behind Jacinda, Amber and Jet.

I harnessed the energy inside me. It strummed to life. In the past few weeks, I'd become more and more competent at controlling my ability. Luckily, I'd had a breakthrough right before we rescued the three newest members in our family. I learned that I had to call upon my own aura before harnessing others. My energy was like a tether, an anchor, that allowed me to control the power from other living things. Without doing that, I had little to no control over other auras.

Pulling up my own power, I molded it into a ball. Another skill I was slowly mastering was doing this without switching my vision. At times, I could feel those energy fields that swirled around every animal and plant.

Similar to the twins and Di, my ability was within my mind. Everything I did was invisible to others.

Using my ball, I pushed at the back of the four wheeler. It didn't move. Cocking my head, I moved the ball to the front and pushed from that side.

The machine moved an inch.

Edgar's mouth dropped. He twirled in a circle. "How'd she do that?"

"You haven't seen the half of it, my friend." Jet chuckled.

Knowing I needed more power, I called on the energy fields around the trees and forest creatures. My energy ball quadrupled in size. It practically crackled in its intensity. If I'd wanted, I could have called upon the entire forest. There were so many life forces out here.

Sticking with the ball I had, I widened my stance. "This might be messy."

The four stepped back.

I slammed my ball into the front of Edgar's four wheeler. The sound of twisting metal and splintering wood filled the forest. The four wheeler popped free as if an invisible hand wrestled it out.

Edgar's eyes turned to saucers. "Blimey!"

"I told you." Jet smirked.

Deep grooves cut into the pines where it had been stuck. A moment of remorse for the damage I'd caused stung me. Hopefully, the grooves in the trees would heal.

Jacinda plucked her hands on her hips and surveyed the machine. "Do you think it'll start?"

I eyed the bent handle bars and dispersed my ball, letting the energy return to its owners. "Only one way to find out."

Edgar climbed aboard and turned the key. Luckily, it started. "Me finks drivin' might be funny." He turned the twisted handlebars.

Amber giggled. "You'll manage."

Edgar turned the four wheeler off again and swung his leg over it. He gazed above at the towering trees while sitting on the seat, his legs dangling down one side. "Pretty here, in' it?"

"Very," I agreed.

"Does it make you miss home too?" Amber asked.

I thought about the hidden cabin in the Forbidden Hills. The cabin we'd all grown up in. It had been surrounded by forest too. "Yeah."

She stuffed her hands in her pockets. "Me too."

The wind wasn't quite as strong in the dense trees, and as the minutes passed, the anxiety in everyone's clouds grew.

Jet paced a few times.

Jacinda kept glancing anxiously in the direction the others had gone. A few times, we heard a distant howl. Each time, an eager look formed on Jacinda's face.

"It could be a coyote," Jet said, a teasing lilt in his voice. "Not necessarily your werewolf."

Jacinda glared at him. "He's not *my* werewolf."

"Oh no?" Jet's eyebrows rose. "From how you two are acting, I'm expecting some wolf pups in a few months."

Jacinda crossed her arms.

Amber muffled a giggle.

"What you two on about?" From Edgar's confused expression, I guessed he still didn't comprehend the twins' humor. Of course, being locked away in an underground prison for most of one's life probably didn't help with one's social skills.

"Just ignore him," I said. "That's what most of us do."

Jacinda laughed and gave me a wink.

We continued waiting for everyone to come back, and the energy in our group kept growing. I was beginning to wonder if they were ever going to return when the screech of an eagle tore through the sky. A gigantic bald eagle flew directly above the tree line.

"Susannah!" Edgar shouted. "There you are, love!"

I stared in awe at her huge form, but she quickly disappeared from view. Scanning our surroundings, I searched for the others. "Where are they? We can't let her out of sight!"

Jacinda's brow puckered. "There's no sign of them."

I jumped on my four wheeler. "Come on! This may be our only chance."

Everyone else climbed aboard their vehicles. Edgar hopped on Mica's, leaving his twisted four wheeler behind.

I revved my engine. The scent of pine again filled the air as needles kicked up from the dirt. Everyone else followed. I waved Edgar to my side

as we raced down the hill. Susannah became visible again, but she was gaining ground quickly.

“Do you think you can convince her to descend?” I yelled.

Edgar ducked his head to avoid a tree branch. “If I get close enough, probably!”

“She’s flying too fast!” Jet pulled his four wheeler to my side. Our engines whined.

I swerved around a large rock. “We need to catch her!”

I dared a glance over my shoulder to see how Amber and Jacinda faired. Amber was only ten feet behind us, but Jacinda was losing ground. Panic covered my sister’s face. Jacinda and excitement did not mix well.

“Go find the others!” I yelled to her.

She shot me a thumbs up, looking relieved, as the rest of us raced onward.

Wind whipped across my face as we barreled down a hill. The bitingly cold sting made my eyes water. Susannah’s flying form grew farther and farther away. “We’re going to have to use our powers! It’s the only way to stop her!” My words carried above the engines.

“I think you’re right!” Jet inched closer to my side. “Edgar, if we get her down, can you help catch her?”

Edgar’s dark gaze brightened. Excitement shone in his eyes. It briefly occurred to me that this was probably the most exciting thing that had ever happened to him.

He nodded. “I ‘tink so.”

Hair whipped in front of my eyes. I hurriedly pushed it away. “I’ll block her with an energy ball!” My yell barely carried about the loud engines. “Jet, can you persuade her to stay calm?”

“I’m too far away!” Jet’s swerved just in time to avoid a cactus. We’d broken out of the trees and were back in the desert. “We need to get closer!”

“Give me a minute!” I welled up the power within me and then called upon the clouds around my family and the surrounding animals. Susannah was at least a half a mile ahead of us. I’d never manipulated a ball that far before, but if we were going to catch her, I’d have to.

“Here goes nothing,” I muttered.

I mentally flung my ball while also driving at full speed. It wasn’t easy, but I kept my gaze on Susannah’s departing form. I didn’t want to hurt her but we needed to get her lower.

However, descending the ball in front of her was harder than I thought it would be. I felt it fall short. “I need to get closer!”

I revved my engine again. The engine whined in protest as sand kicked up with the tires. Jet, Edgar and Amber followed.

“Try again!” Jet yelled.

Calling upon my power, I formed another ball. Keeping my gaze on Susannah, I imagined throwing the ball up in front of her, effectively blocking her path. I switched my vision until the world became a sea of clouds. White clouds bubbled around all of the plants and small desert animals. The colorful clouds surrounding my family’s shoulders pulsed around them. Our adrenaline made them grow. So much energy.

I gathered our clouds in a large, swirling rainbow. I then pulled the clouds from every plant we passed. Sweat trickled down my temple, creating an icy trail as wind blasted against my face.

You can do this, Lena. Call upon it all. Form a huge ball, then you don’t have to be so accurate. Make a huge wall that she can’t pass.

Fatigue grew within me. So much power. So much to control. The sweat on my body grew. It trickled down my back.

When a swirling ball of energy pulsed above me, I flung it as far as I could and then wrenched it up toward the sky at the last minute.

An eagle scream reached my ears. Susannah’s giant form plummeted in the distance, her body falling out of control.

My heart jumped into my throat. “No!”

But a second later, her wings spread. She soared to the left.

“Do it again!” Jet called.

I kept the massive ball in place and manipulated it into her path again. Instead of running into it and falling, this time Susannah seemed to sense it. She turned.

“Again!” Jet commanded.

Darkness grew around the edge of my vision as I again manipulated my energy ball, effectively pushing Susannah closer to us. Dizziness made my hands falter on the four wheeler’s handles. I gritted my teeth. *Stay focused!*

“She’s flying right toward us!” Amber’s gleeful words penetrated the fog that threatened to swallow me.

Breathing heavily, I gulped in breaths of the winter air as we sailed over the desert. Relief followed when Susannah’s white head grew larger.

Amber was right. She flew right at us, only a hundred feet up.

“Is she close enough now?” I slowed my four-wheeler. My body swayed. If I didn’t stop, I feared I’d fall off.

Susannah flew even lower and faster. From her panicked flaps, I knew she was scared.

I stopped, the heavy machine vibrating beneath me. The others halted by my side. Panting heavily, I rested my forearms on the handle bars. “Can you stop her now?”

Jet closed his eyes. “I think so.”

As Jet’s emotional powers strummed in invisible waves from his mind, I watched Susannah slow. Her flapping grew less frantic. Her wings began to cup. I wanted to clap in relief but was worried I’d break Jet’s concentration.

When Susannah hovered above us, she circled a few times, each time descending more and more. Edgar hopped off his four-wheeler and raced to an open area on our left. He called to her.

She screamed in return.

Edgar grinned. “Come on, Suzie love. Land ‘erself, right ‘ere!” With a flourish, he waved at the open patch.

Susannah’s giant wings nearly brushed against my face when she came into land. A rush of air rustled the red curls flying free from under my hat.

She screamed again as her talons opened. With a silent whoosh, she settled in the sand.

“That a girl!” Edgar kneeled down. “We’ve been lookin’ for you, love.”

Susannah ruffled her feathers. She stepped closer to Edgar.

Jet’s breath came out in a rush. His eyes snapped open. “She’s here?”

“Right there.” I hooked a thumb in her direction.

We both grinned. Jet looked as fatigued as I felt.

“Now what?” Amber asked.

Edgar picked up Susannah, awkwardly standing with the giant, docile eagle. “I’ll carry ‘er. Can one of you drive?”

CHAPTER FOUR

Edgar managed to hold Susannah the entire way back to the house. A few times we had to stop so he could rearrange his grip. I could tell that Susannah found his presence comforting. She seemed careful to keep her talons tightly clenched so as not to scratch him.

Beyond that, I wasn't sure how much she understood about what was going on around her.

As soon as we reached the desert fortress, Edgar carried her inside, telling us to give him a minute. We spent that time parking the four wheelers back in the garage.

A door slammed just as we cut the last engine.

"She's in the bathroom. She'll change and 'ten probably clean up." Edgar's brown eyes shone with excitement. He'd seemed to enjoy our excursion more than any of us.

Everyone else showed up an hour later.

Jacinda rode her four wheeler beside Luke, who was still in wolf form. After he transformed back to human, he explained that he'd found Susannah about a mile from where Jet, Amber, Edgar, Jacinda and I had stopped, but he'd approached her too quickly, essentially scaring her back into the air.

"Nice job on getting her back." He shook out his shaggy mane of caramel colored hair. A few pine needles fell to the floor. I guessed those had been caught in his fur while he'd been running as a wolf.

I didn't know the specifics of how transforming worked, but I assumed Luke, Edgar and Susannah would be naked once they reverted to human form. I didn't know how they couldn't be. As for when Susannah would finally come out of the bathroom, I had no idea about that either. We'd been home for over two hours, and she still hadn't appeared.

Scents of garlic and roasted chicken floated into the living room as the twins, Mica and Amber cooked an early dinner. Despite the appetizing aromas, I didn't get up from the couch to investigate. I was too tired.

Jacinda sauntered into the living room. “Is Susannah still in the shower?”

“Yep.”

Jacinda plopped down on the couch beside me, causing the cushion to angle in her direction. The damn sofa was so hard I once again wondered why anyone would buy it. Granted it went with the house’s modern décor, but it was about as comfortable as sitting on a steel plank.

SUSANNAH FINALLY MADE an appearance as we sat down for supper. Her long, black hair cascaded down her back while blazing, blue eyes peered out of a waifish face. She wore an oversized T-shirt and sweatpants. Both hung on her.

I stood up from the table as soon as she entered the room and smiled brightly. A part of me worried about what Susannah would think of Jet and me. We’d used our powers to manipulate her. That was something we *never* did to one another. Well, except for the twins, but they hadn’t done that since being teenagers in the Forbidden Hills.

I was especially concerned since it was Susannah. Even though she’d been with us for over a week, ever since Chicago, she’d never really talked to or engaged with anybody. Having us use our powers to control her, however necessary it was, wasn’t conducive to growing trust.

Susannah paused beside the table, eyeing all of us. Her head cocked a few times at unnatural speed.

“Hi.” I approached her slowly.

She watched me warily and took a step back.

I stopped and wrung my hands. “I’m sorry about this afternoon. Jet and I didn’t mean to hurt you. We were worried about you and needed you to return here. I hope you understand.”

She merely watched me, her bright blue eyes distrustful.

“Are you hungry?” I waved at the food. “We’ve got a lot. Do you want to join us?”

Her gaze shifted to the table. Everyone sat silently around it.

Susannah assessed the dishes, licking her lips. A large plate held marinated steaks and chicken breasts. Various bowls of side dishes sat around it: mashed potatoes, a garden salad, fresh fruit, rice pilaf and a few other items. Condiments were littered in between.

I stepped toward the empty chair and pulled it out. The scraping sound made her jump. “You must be hungry.”

Susannah darted a look at me before hurriedly searching for Luke and Edgar. I didn’t blame her. I’d used my balls to manipulate her from the sky. Not exactly the best way to build a friendship.

Edgar smiled and waved at the chair. “Sit down, love. Have some tea.”

Edgar’s grinning face seemed to calm her more than mine. I inched back to give her room.

Susannah tentatively sat, her limbs tensed. It looked as though she would jump up at any moment and run away.

Luke speared a huge, juicy steak.

My eyes bulged. It had to be at least ten ounces.

“Here ya go.” He dumped it on her plate. “I know how you like your meat.”

Susannah’s pupils dilated. She reached for her fork and knife. Any concerns I had of her leaving, evaporated. Susannah attacked the giant hunk of beef. *Attacking* was truly how it looked. She cut into it with such ferocity that it looked as if she was killing it.

At least she used utensils. I wouldn’t have been surprised if she picked it up with her bare hands and transformed her fingers into talons in order to tear the meat apart.

“Well, then.” Jacinda settled her napkin in her lap. “Would you pass me the salad, Jasper?” Her polite tone and calm manner seemed to help everyone remove their attention from Susannah.

I returned to my seat. Flint pushed my chair out and then pulled it back into the table once I was seated. For a second, my head spun. He’d done it at his speed.

He placed a comforting hand on my thigh. His heat seared through my jeans.

I took helpings of everything, doing my best not to stare as juice ran down Susannah’s chin. It was hard to look away. She chewed greedily on the steak. I wouldn’t have been surprised if at any second an eagle’s scream pierced the dining room.

But there was one thing I did know. I no longer had the worst table manners.

AFTER DINNER WE hung out in the living room. Jasper got a fire going. It was the one thing about the home that wasn't modern since it actually required wood and matches, not like the gas fireplace in Father's study. It soon crackled and glowed, sending heat through the room.

It felt good. Despite the home's advanced HVAC system, it was still cool. Outside, snow flurries danced against the window, the large flakes floating together.

I lounged on the couch snuggled against Flint. His heavy, muscled arm kept me close.

Everyone else lay on the floor or sprawled on the furniture. From the low energy feeling clouds, we were all exhausted.

"Are we getting a Christmas tree this year?" Amber asked as everyone settled in for a lazy night.

"We should!" Mica replied. Jasper had an arm draped over Mica's shoulders.

I was relieved that Amber didn't seem bothered. Instead, Amber's attention was on Edgar as he said something funny in his peculiar accent. Amber giggled.

"I hardly think we have time for a Christmas tree," Di muttered. "We have too much going on."

"What's a Christmas tree?" Susannah asked quietly. She stood at the edge of the living room, as if trying to hide in the shadows. Her voice was soft and pleasant sounding, so different from her eagle scream.

Everyone fell silent after she spoke. It was the first thing she'd said all night.

I smiled brightly at her. "It's a pine tree decorated for the Christmas holiday. Have you never seen one?"

Susannah hesitated and then shook her head.

"We didn't celebrate holidays," Luke explained.

Jet's eyebrows rose. "But you know what a Christmas tree is?"

Luke shrugged. "More or less. I think I saw one in a movie once."

Flint and I shared a concerned look. If we had grown up in O'Brien's research facility, we probably wouldn't know what a Christmas tree was either.

"Well, we should definitely put one up then." Amber smiled prettily.

Di sat down on a free chair, her dark clothing in contrast to the light gray fabric. "We'll see."

I sneaked a peek at Susannah. She still cowered in the corner, her thin arms wrapped around her knees as she sat on the floor, watching everyone. At least she hadn’t left.

The rest of us talked for a while longer, but when the clock struck nine, we all got up. Despite being early, it seemed everyone was ready for bed.

Ashy smoke curled up the chimney when Flint pulled me down the stairwell. Now that we’d found Susannah, some of the worry had left me, but we still hadn’t heard from Father.

I had no idea if he was safe.

CHAPTER FIVE

Flint changed the bed sheets while I showered. He was good about stuff like that. I probably would have left them for another month.

The sound of snapping sheets and fluffing pillows sounded from the bedroom while I towel dried my hair in the bathroom. Flint never seemed to care that I was a messy, impulsive person. Not once had he ever huffed or got annoyed when I lost something or left a dirty pair of jeans at the end of the bed. I tried to be neater. Truly, I did, but that was as easy for me as a dead canary singing in the coal mines. But Flint didn't seem to mind. He loved me as I was.

I opened the door wider and got a glimpse of his broad shoulders as he stuffed a pillow into a pillowcase. The way his muscles bunched and moved made my breath catch. Desire flowed through my veins. No other man affected me like he did.

An undercurrent of energy poured off him. It was so easy to feel now. I switched my vision. His beautiful blue, pale green and orange cloud appeared. It glowed around him in a sphere. I pulled up the energy within me and then gave his cloud a tug.

With a mental flick, I flung my cloud to join his. Together, our clouds intermingled, my unique bright green, blue and pale green cloud blending with his. They danced and entwined, like a beautiful rainbow swirling together in a soft breeze. If I wanted to, I could have given him a playful shove with the ball, like someone bumping him from behind, but his expression when he turned made me stop.

Shadows in the room dipped and played across his features, making the worry lines more prominent. His chestnut-colored hair sat in unruly waves on his head. He'd threaded his fingers through it all evening. I knew why he'd been so agitated. Father. Marcus. We still had no idea what was happening on the outside.

And we still had no idea what came next.

Despite Flint always being the rock for me to lean on, the hard, safe anchor I depended on—he was still human. If I was scared or worried, he put up a brave front, like he did last night while we were making dinner. But here, when he thought he was alone, when he thought I couldn't see—his true feelings emerged.

I let the energy disperse and snapped my sight back to normal.

I padded into the room. After Flint turned, I let the towel fall. My long, crimson curls draped around me, still damp. They covered my breasts but nothing else.

Even from a distance, I saw his pupils dilate. He tossed the pillow he'd been holding aside and walked to me in slow, purposeful strides. He stopped only inches away.

My breath came fast.

Just his nearness did that. Even after all these years, where we'd been together and in love, he still got my heart pounding with just a look. I thought for sure after we finally began making love again that things would calm, maybe even cool for a while, but the opposite had happened. It was like now that we remembered how amazing our bodies felt joined as one, it was all we wanted.

At times, Flint would turn and his shirt would stretch across his chest, or his jeans would hug his strong thighs, and just like that, I was a mess of desire. I knew it was the same for him. Some days, he'd sneak up behind me and gather me against him, pushing my hair away from my neck before kissing and nipping the sensitive areas of my skin.

More than once, we hadn't made it back to our bedroom. Instead, we'd pushed into closets, bathrooms, or the nearest deserted bedroom. We'd lock ourselves inside for a few minutes of hurried, almost animalistic mating. Outside, on the rare occasions when we'd been able to go for walks in the desert or get away from the group for even an hour, we'd quickly fall into a tangle of limbs, desperately touching and ripping our clothes to get at one another. It didn't matter that we were outside, bare to the world.

And right now, it was no different. My breasts grew fuller and heavier under his gaze. My nipples hardened as if coming to attention for him.

He pulled me closer. His mouth descended over mine as I wrapped my arms around his neck. There was a desperation, a rawness to him, that made him almost frenzied. Neither of us said a word. I knew what he needed and willingly gave myself to him completely.

Afterward, we lay entwined on the smooth sheets, a sheen of sweat covering our bodies. I shivered. My hair was still damp and the room cool. Flint pulled me tighter to him, his heat warming my bare skin. With a free hand, he traced a finger up and down my spine. The energy that pulsed around him when he felt a strong emotion grew. I couldn't always tell what caused it. Sometimes it was obvious, but tonight, I wasn't sure if it was from desire or fear. They were too closely intermingled.

"You're shivering," Flint whispered when another chill hit me. In one of his blurred movements, he threw the clean top sheet and thick, down comforter back on the bed. Before I had a chance to take a breath, he was beside me again, the heavy bedding still not fully settled.

He pulled the covers around us before locking his arm around my waist and pulling me closely to him. Flint hit the light switch beside the bed.

Biting my lip, I drifted off to sleep.

I WAS IN a dream. I knew I was in a dream because I was flying. It was amazingly fun. With a slight push from my feet, I elevated into the air, hanging as if suspended, and then I turned my body and with a mental push, raced through the air.

A noise permeated the dream, as if someone called me. I shrugged it off. I didn't want to wake.

Whoever was calling me, however, was pretty persistent. "Lena!" Something pushed me, rustling my shoulder. "Wake up, Lena!"

The flying dream faded. I opened my eyes, grumbling. "What?"

"Get up. You need to come with us to the wine cellar."

I blinked a few times and pushed curls out of my face. "Jacinda?"

"Yes," she whispered. "You and Flint need to get up and come with me."

Flint was already awake, looking as confused and sleepy as I felt.

I sat up. It was still dark. It had to be the middle of the night. "Why?"

"Just do it."

Jacinda's direct tone made my annoyance vanish. I'd never heard her speak like that before.

She left so we could dress. Neither of us had bothered with pajamas before falling asleep.

"Do you know what this is about?" I asked Flint.

He shook his head, but the worry lines were back on his face. After he pulled his jeans on, he waited until I was mostly presentable before clasping my hand and tugging me to the door.

Jacinda waited in the hallway. I reached for the light switch, but she stopped me. “No lights.”

My eyes widened, but I did as she said. With a hurried turn, she walked quickly down the hall. Flint and I followed. Both of us gave one another questioning glances. When we reached the wine cellar, Jacinda opened the massive door. Light peeked out. We hurried in.

What I saw inside made my mouth drop.

Everyone was in the cellar still looking dazed from sleep. I whirled around. “What’s going on?”

Jacinda firmly shut the door and glanced at Di.

“Jacinda heard something, about twenty minutes ago,” Di said. “She turned her hearing on full force. From what she can gather, we’re surrounded. Ten men are staked-out outside the house, about a hundred yards away.”

My stomach plummeted. *No, it can’t be true! How did Marcus find us?*

“Do they have Father?” I screeched.

Di shook her head firmly. “No. I broke the rules and text him. He’s safe in Houston right now.”

Relief poured through me. Even though Di’s text could be traced, I was glad she’d done it. Usually, we never contacted Father when he went into the outside world. We always waited to hear from him, but I agreed with Di. It was better to know he was safe.

Heat and energy escalated off Flint. “What are the men saying?”

Jacinda wrung her hands. “Last I checked, they were coordinating how to attack.”

Di began pacing. “We came down here because it’s the only room underground that’s fully enclosed. Jacinda thought she heard them talking about a listening device. This is the only safe room for us to talk in.”

“Is Marcus with them?” Flint’s voice grew edgier, energy rolling off him in waves.

“I don’t think so,” Jacinda replied. “There’s been no mention of him.”

Luke growled at the mention of Marcus. The werewolf sat on a stool, his large shoulders dipped forward. His head hung. “I think this is my fault.”

Flint's gaze narrowed. "What do you mean *your fault?* Did you contact someone?"

Luke's head snapped up, his expression incredulous. "What? No! Never!" He paused for a moment, his brow furrowing. "But I'm guessing my tracking device has been activated again." He smacked himself on the forehead. "Of course! I'm such an idiot! When I transformed yesterday, it probably triggered it. I didn't consider that possibility, but it's how they tracked me when I was free in the wild. I should have been more careful." He angrily raked a hand through his hair.

Flint took a menacing step toward Luke. "*What* tracking device?"

Luke stood and paced a few times. His muscles rippled in his forearms as he clenched and unclenched his fists. His hair, bronzish gold, glowed every time it hit the light. "They implanted it in me years ago. Dammit!" He pounded his fist into the wall. The wall vibrated. "I should have known!"

Di crossed her arms. "Why didn't you tell us this sooner?"

Luke stopped pacing and shrugged. "I didn't think about it. It only occurred to me just now that the tracking device is probably how they found us. Most of the time I forget it's there."

Mica cocked her head. "How can you possibly forget it's there?"

"It's probably like reality TV shows." Jacinda defended him. "When a camera's always there, you forget about it and do something embarrassing."

"Are you *sure* that's how they found us?" Flint asked, ignoring both of them.

Luke nodded his head solemnly. "I'm pretty sure." He sat back down, his shoulders slumping.

"So we'll need to get that device out of you." I placed a hand on Flint's arm. "But first, we need to figure out how to get out of this situation."

Everyone else was eerily quiet in the room. Amber stood beside Edgar. She still wore pajamas and her wide, frightened eyes darted between Flint and Luke. The twins were both on edge, apparent in the tense way they stood, as if waiting for someone to burst through the door and attack at any second.

Mica stood beside Jasper, every now and then brushing against him. Only Susannah seemed oblivious. She hovered quietly in the corner, her dark hair tumbling down her back, her bright blue eyes holding a far-away look. I wondered how much she understood about what was happening.

Jet put his hands on his hips. "So what do we do?"

Luke’s hands clenched into fists again. “I can take at least four of them.”

“No,” Di said sharply. “You, Edgar and Susannah are staying out of this. So are Jacinda and Amber.”

“What?” Luke roared. “Are you kidding me? I’m stronger than anyone here!”

His energy increased a hundred fold. I let it wash over me. If I hadn’t, it would have brought me to my knees.

“Luke.” Di’s tone grew lower. “You’re too hot headed. It’s too much of a risk, so you’re staying *here*.”

He took a menacing step closer to her.

Without considering how wise my actions were, I gathered up the energy inside me and then pulled the aura from around Luke’s shoulders. Using it, I forced him onto his stool.

He sat down with a humph. A bewildered look covered his face. I could feel him try to rise, but I kept him down, concentrating and pulling everyone else’s energy into my ball. Luke was strong. He wasn’t easy to hold.

“I can’t move!” Panic laced Luke’s voice. “What the hell’s happening to me?”

Di glanced my way. “That would be Lena. Now, if you’ll let me explain, you’ll understand why I want you to stay here.”

I felt something else enter my ball. Another energy, almost like a trickle of water, flowing through it. Jet and Jasper both watched Luke, their faces masked in concentration.

Luke’s muscles softened under my grip, and his legs stopped trying to straighten. A drunken smile emerged. “Yeah sure, Di, whatever you say.”

I dispersed the energy, letting the twins work their emotional control over the werewolf. That was twice today we’d manipulated our new family members, and while that didn’t sit well with me, I also knew now wasn’t the time for moral questioning.

Our lives may be at stake. Luke was unpredictable. Ten men surrounded the house, and we were currently trapped in the cellar. Time was of the essence.

Di gave each of us a nod of thanks. “Now, as I was saying . . .”

WE SPENT THE next few minutes working out a plan to remove everyone from the house safely. Since Di, Flint, the twins, Mica and I had so much experience working together and using our abilities in a coordinated manner, Di felt it was safest for us to take care of the men outside while leaving everyone else safely locked within.

I completely agreed.

Jacinda crept out of the cellar with us. After she worked out where all of the men were located, we could move into action. It was still pitch black outside, so it was probably the middle of the night.

I shuddered, wondering how long those men had been out there. Jacinda said they had a listening device. Had they listened to our late night conversation around the fire in the living room? My eyes widened. *Did they hear Flint and I having sex?* That thought was oddly creepy.

We crept up to the main floor. Going out the front door wouldn't exactly be inconspicuous so we decided to exit through the garage side door. It was as secure as the front door but less noticeable. Of course, the ten men would probably have eyes on both, but at least landscaping camouflaged the garage area.

Di made a motion to Jacinda.

Jacinda closed her eyes. None of us moved. The slightest sound could distract her. I also knew when her hearing was turned on full force that sounds could be deafening. She listened silently before opening her eyes. "They haven't moved. They're still trying to figure out how to get in. The latest discussion is about using explosives."

I tensed. "No time to waste then."

Di nodded. "Exactly. Jet and Jasper?"

The twins closed their eyes. I didn't know if either had ever manipulated so many people at one time before. Between the two of them, they were trying to influence the moods and thought patterns of ten men, which meant five individuals for each of them simultaneously. I imagined they were projecting happy, calming feelings to the men—similar to what they'd done to the guards at O'Brien's warehouse in Chicago.

Di disappeared to collect supplies from the garage. Minutes ticked by as we all waited. The tension in the room felt as thick as gelatin, the anxiety among us almost palpable. I took a deep breath. A headache brewed in the back of my mind. So much energy. So much anxiety.

Flint’s energy wasn’t helping. It was so strong it made me nauseous. He’d stayed close to my side since hearing about the men. Rage slithered through his cloud. The men outside threatened us. They threatened *me*. And if there was one thing that got Flint’s temper roaring, it was someone trying to harm me.

Squeezing Flint’s hand, I tried to reassure him. He gripped my hand tightly in response.

Di finally reappeared with a bag of zipties. “These should work for tying them up,” she whispered, handing the bag to Flint.

He grabbed the bag as we waited for the twins.

It seemed like forever before Jet gave a curt nod. “Go!” Sweat poured from his brow.

Jasper’s was the same. The twins’ arms were tensed, their hands clenched into fists. I knew they were fighting to keep the men under control. We needed to move.

“Flint, Lena, Mica!” Di yelled.

Flint squeezed my hand one last time before all four of us sprinted to the garage. We burst through the door into the massive enclosure before running to the side door.

I punched in the code and the thick, steel door swung silently open. Cold night air flowed across my face when I crouched and slunk through the door and outside. Mica, Flint and Di did the same, following silently behind me.

According to Jacinda, six men surrounded the front of the property. Four hid in the back. We hunkered down, moving from shrub to shrub along the garage wall to stay as covered as possible. If Jet and Jasper were still holding the men, the men probably wouldn’t notice us and if they did, they probably wouldn’t care. If all went to plan, Marcus’ men would be feeling obliviously happy.

Di crouched beside the house and closed her eyes. Seeing the future was never a guarantee, but she had more control now over her powers than she did four months ago. If Di was able to see future actions from these men, she could shout a warning, or at the very least, give us a heads up if something was about to happen.

“Mica, do you see them?” I whispered.

Flint, Mica and I hid in a deep shadow by the house. Nothing seemed unusual. All I saw was a dark desert landscape with tumbleweeds

occasionally blowing by. The crisp smell of snow hung in the air.

Mica scanned the perimeter. She pointed. “There, there and over there.”

I switched my vision. Clouds appeared around each man, but at night, it was harder to see them. The grayish colors blended into the dark. Without Mica pointing out where the men were, I wouldn’t have been able to pinpoint their exact locations.

“Do you see them?” she whispered.

I nodded. Closing my eyes, I gathered my energy before pulling fields in the area. I created three separate balls. Wielding the balls through the air, I opened my eyes and carefully lowered them over the three men, pinning them in place. I didn’t feel any resistance. Jet and Jasper’s manipulations were still working.

“Flint?” I said.

With a blur of movement, he took off.

I couldn’t see Flint in the night, but I knew what he was doing. He raced to each man, knocking each unconscious before securing their hands and feet with the zipties. I didn’t feel at all guilty about that. Jacinda had heard that each man carried handcuffs, rope, blindfolds and gags. Those were to be used on us when we were captured. Rage boiled in me at the thought. I’d fight tooth and nail before I let them take me again.

Flint moved quickly. He was back within minutes.

Di continued to crouch by the wall, concentrating on the future. When we asked her if any danger lay ahead, she frowned. “I . . . don’t think so.”

She bit her lip.

Flint, Mica and I moved systematically around the house. Mica found the men, I created energy balls and held the men in place, while Flint rendered them unconscious before tying them up. One by one, we took them down.

Despite being woken in the middle of the night, power surged through me. My adrenaline had me running full force.

“How many more?” I whispered. The three of us crouched in the backyard. A juniper brushed against me. With it came its subtle scent.

“Two.” Mica’s breath puffed in a cloud in the cold night. “Both are hidden by the rock garden. They’re as relaxed as the others. Those two are actually laying down.”

“Jet and Jasper are doing a good job.” Flint’s deep voice rumbled in the night. “Still, I’d rather we finish this. Lena?”

“Coming right up.” I readied two energy balls just as Di gasped.

“Susannah!” Di’s eyes flashed open.

All three of us turned to Di just as I felt it. The energy around the men increased. Gone were the docile, easy-going clouds. The mens’ auras became filled with confusion, worry and then anger.

“Crap!” I screeched.

Not a second later, the door on the deck above us slid open. In the quiet night, the grating sound seemed as loud as an electric saw.

Flint flew into action. One second he was squatted beside me, the next he stood on the deck, jumping the fifteen feet as if it were nothing.

Shouts came from the backyard. The two men were calling for their team. I didn’t know where to look. Marcus’ men or the deck.

The deck won.

An image of Susannah walking along the boards as Flint and Jet grabbed hold of her was the only thing I saw before a shot fired.

No!

Jet and Flint ducked, pulling Susannah with them. My heart pounded. No one appeared hurt.

The two remaining men were still crouched twenty yards away. They continually shouted for their team. I had no idea if the other eight men were still unconscious. But if Jet stood on the deck, hauling Susannah back inside, that meant Jet’s men may have regained consciousness. If that happened, they’d most likely be struggling against their zipties and possibly pulling free.

Di grabbed my wrist. “We need to get out of here!”

Another shot fired. Flint groaned and grabbed his arm.

He fell.

“No!” the scream ripped from my throat. I bolted for the stairs as fear in its purest form erupted in my core. Di followed.

Another shot fired.

A stair tread exploded into splinters two feet in front of me.

Di careened to a stop and pulled me to the ground. Her hand practically clawed into my arm she held me so hard. “Lena, focus! You need to stop them. I have to get to Flint!”

She stood and sprinted to the stairs just as another yell came from the men. The two were fully standing now and advancing, not even trying to conceal themselves. Both raised their guns, aiming high.

They were trying to hit my family.

Jet, Flint, Di and Susannah were all on the deck. They were exposed in the night. Easy targets.

Rage filled me. If I didn't stop these men, no one would.

Standing from my hunkered position, the wind picked up as I turned to face the men. I called upon the energy inside me as I raised my arms, palms lifted to the sky. I summoned every living thing around me.

Flint was hurt.

The wind howled. I gathered the life forces.

These men will pay.

Pure, raw energy in its most basic form flew from every direction as I drew upon the plants and animals. The ball I created crackled and shimmered in the night. A ball only I could see. The sound and feel of it called to me. Another shout came before I crashed the ball on top of the men.

A pitiful yelp was all I heard before both lay motionless on the ground. Dead or alive, I didn't know.

I didn't care.

Mica was pulling on my shirt sleeve before I realized that I still stood there, staring at the men.

They weren't moving.

" . . . come on, Lena. We need to . . . everyone's inside . . . hurt in the shoulder . . ."

Her words were like jelly. Thick, sluggish. They didn't penetrate my ears.

It wasn't until Di stood in front of me, shaking my shoulders that I snapped back to the present. The first thing I felt was the wind. It was cold.

"Lena? Are you okay?" Her words were quiet. Concerned sounding. "Lena?"

I held up a hand. I was trembling. "Flint . . ." my voice shook. "Is he . . ."

"He's fine. He took a hit in the shoulder, but it's more of a graze. It'll leave a nasty scar when it heals, but it's not deep."

My knees gave out.

Mica caught me before I fell. “Jasper!”

The twin’s footsteps sounded on the stairs. I tried to stand upright but I couldn’t.

Flint was hit.

They’d shot him. My world became a single, finite thought. *They shot Flint. They shot Flint.*

“Pick her up, Jasper. Let’s all get inside. We need to get moving.”

I barely processed Di’s harsh commands.

They shot Flint.

I HAD NO idea how much time passed between Jasper carrying me into the house and everyone gathering in the living room. It could have been minutes. Or hours. Or days. For a portion of time, I lost all connection to reality.

It wasn’t until I sat beside Flint, smelled his unique scent and knew that he’d be okay that I truly became grounded.

He put his good arm around me. “I’m fine.” His quiet words were like comfort, home and safety wrapped into one.

“I almost lost you,” I whispered.

“Hardly. It’s just a scrape.”

“But it could have been so much worse.”

He didn’t respond for a moment. “But it wasn’t.”

His words were honest but did little to comfort me. Luckily, neither Flint nor I were needed to secure all ten men. Luke was strong enough to do it on his own.

“Luke, can you move all of them?” Di asked.

The werewolf’s mouth tightened. “Only if you guys promise not to use that manipulating crap on me again.”

Di’s eyes softened. “I’m sorry about that. It’s what we needed to do in the little time we had. It’s *not* something we take lightly.”

Jacinda touched his arm. Guilt lined her face. “We normally never use our powers on each other. It’s against the rules.”

Luke grumbled and shuffled his feet. “All right, fine.”

“So you’ll help move the men?” Di raised an eyebrow.

He grinned, his golden eyes flickering. “I’d be more than happy to.”

LUKE FOUND TWO vans parked half a mile down our drive. We figured that was how Marcus' men traveled here. Di asked him to break into the vans and put the men inside. When Luke retrieved the two men I'd crushed to the ground, Di checked their pulses. Both were still alive.

I didn't realize I'd been holding my breath until she said that. My earlier nonchalance about hurting them had disappeared. Something else had taken its place.

Since Di wouldn't let Flint help, the two of us, along with Edgar, stayed in the living room to keep an eye on Susannah. The otter's presence seemed to comfort her.

Susannah stayed by Edgar's side while he murmured soft, soothing words. In a way, she was like a trapped animal. Scared, easily spooked and entirely unpredictable.

None of us could trust her.

Apparently, Susannah had left the cellar when no one was looking and wandered upstairs. It was only when she opened the screen door that Jet snapped out of his trance and realized what was happening. He'd lost hold of the remaining men when he sprinted after her. It was a harsh lesson learned.

Next time, we'd need a better plan if Susannah was involved. We obviously couldn't trust her judgment and would need to ensure she was secured before we did anything else.

"How's your shoulder?" I peeked at the bandage around Flint's arm. The bandage was still white. No fresh blood.

"It'll be fine in a day or two."

I took a deep breath and tried to calm my pounding heart. Now that my scare of losing Flint was wearing off, a new concern took its place.

I almost killed two men, and I didn't think twice about it.

Biting my lip, I clasped my hands so Flint wouldn't see them trembling.

Everyone else returned a short while later, their cheeks rosy from the cold. "The men are all secured in those vans." Di's eyes practically glowed with manic energy.

"Were they hard to move?" I asked.

Amber shook her head. She was still in pajamas. "Their bodies were as limp as rag dolls. We laid them in the back of the van."

"They're basically in a big pile." Mica grinned.

In other words, none of them had regained consciousness.

I sat up straighter on the hard, annoyingly uncomfortable sofa. Clearing my throat, I tried to ask as casually as I could, “What about the two I knocked out? How are they doing?”

“They’re still breathing fine.” Di brushed dirt from her pants. “They’ll most likely have severe concussions from the force of your ball.” From her cold words, I knew she didn’t regret my actions. “Now, we need to get moving. This home is no longer safe.”

“Yeah, of course. Let’s get going.” I shoved my hands in my pockets so nobody would see them shaking.

None of us knew how long it would take for Marcus to find his unconscious men, but I guessed it would be less than twenty-four hours. Part of me worried at what the men would tell him. The men would inevitably remember something about our powers manipulating them, and the more Marcus knew about our abilities, the weaker we were. If he could anticipate our actions based off of our abilities, he’d have a distinct advantage.

A memory flashed through my mind. Marcus knew what I could do. He’d flown right off his feet when my energy ball blasted him out of the warehouse only a week ago. I swallowed uneasily. I hadn’t thought twice then either about hurting someone. That was *two* times now I’d reacted without thinking. Two times I’d hurt other people. I winced when I bit my lip so hard it broke skin.

“Everyone pack one bag of essential belongings.” Di’s voice snapped me back to the present. “Also pack your dark clothing, equipment and gear from Chicago. We’re leaving within the hour.”

Amber’s mouth dropped. “That soon?”

“We have no choice.”

Her eyes stayed wide. “Are we coming back?”

“No.” Di pushed a lock of hair behind her ear. “Marcus knows about this house so we can never return. Now everyone get moving.”

Nobody replied. Instead, we all ventured wordlessly to our rooms. Some of us looked dazed, others afraid. Reality was setting in. Marcus had found us. Flint had been shot. Any of us could have easily been killed.

And once again, I hadn’t thought twice before hurting someone who threatened my family.

Heat and energy poured off Flint as we packed. I welcomed the distraction that brought. Despite my attempts to help him, he wouldn't let me. I took some comfort watching him use his injured arm. He never winced. Maybe Di was right. Maybe it had only been a scrape. I had yet to see the wound.

Within ten minutes, everyone had returned to the living area and was ready to go. Di, however, was missing.

I dropped my bag at my feet. "Has anyone seen her?"

Everyone shook their heads.

I padded down the hallway as the twins, Jacinda and Luke took the bags outside to the vehicles. The others stayed in the living room. They were nervously talking about where we'd go from here. *If* we could go from here. What if we didn't have any money? What if Father couldn't purchase a new, secure home? Then what?

Since I had an idea where Di would be, I stopped outside Father's study. Sure enough, Di was inside pacing. The screen on her phone lit up, illuminating her face in the dark room. She tapped in a phone number. Lifting it to her ear, the silence ticked by before her voice cut through the night.

"Father? We have a problem."

CHAPTER SIX

Footsteps sounded behind me. Since the lights were off, I didn't see who it was. However, the familiar scent and energy that drifted my way told me exactly who followed me.

"What are you doing?" Flint's tone was curious.

"Listening. I didn't want to disturb her. She seems stressed." I bit my lip again. From the sting, I'd definitely broken skin while sitting on the couch earlier.

"Are you okay?"

I stopped nibbling my lip and stood up straighter. "Yeah, fine."

Flint's gaze narrowed. The bandage peeked out from under his T-shirt.

The sight of it made me swallow sharply. I hurriedly grabbed his hand as emotions overwhelmed me. "Come on, let's join the others."

Everyone stood in the dark living room. Nobody said a thing.

Di finally reappeared a few minutes later, stuffing her phone into her pocket. "All right, let's go."

It wasn't easy to leave the house. I'd grown ridiculously attached to it in the past month. It was silly. It was just an overly expensive, high tech modern home. But still, it had been *my* home, and home these days seemed precious.

We all piled into the Pathfinder and Suburban. The starting engines broke the quiet night. Flurries still flew in the air. They danced in front of the windshield, like fuzz in a snow globe.

From the front passenger seat, I silently bid goodbye to another home. The glass and steel structure gleamed in the moonlight. After we crested a hill and descended, it disappeared from view.

A lump formed in my throat.

I'd never see it again.

The vans with the unconscious men stood like large, silent coffins when we passed them. All of us assumed tracking devices were in those vehicles so we hadn't moved them from their original location. We didn't

know if Marcus had been in communication with the men or not while they surrounded the house. If he had, we didn't have much time. Once Marcus realized his men were no longer responding, he'd investigate. We needed to be long gone before that happened.

I couldn't help but wonder how the two men were that I'd knocked out. It was possible they'd have more than just concussions. I'd slammed my ball at them so hard. I may have caused permanent injury.

My stomach twisted into knots as my hands shook again.

The van disappeared behind us yet my thoughts didn't.

The headlights from our vehicles cut through the dark night as we drove down the long, winding driveway to the road. According to the clock on the dash, it was just after four in the morning. Luckily, that meant no other vehicles were on the public highways.

"Where are we going?" Mica sat beside Jasper in the middle row. Amber and Edgar sat in the very back.

Flint glanced at her in the rearview mirror. "The airport."

"And from there?"

"Not sure."

Heat grew against my back. It took me a second to realize Flint had turned my seat warmer on. That realization got a moment of disbelief from me. Even after being shot, Flint's thoughts were still focused on me. A flash of panic again clawed my gut. Flint had been shot. I could have lost him.

I stuffed that emotion down as far as it would go. Feeling that suffocating panic was worse than my guilt over the two men. "Is . . . uh . . . Father coming back?" My voice sounded hollow, even to me.

Flint glanced my way before looking back at the road. "He's meeting us when we land."

"Do you know where we're landing?"

He shook his head. "Only Di knows."

"Well, hopefully the pilot knows too," Mica muttered.

WE PULLED INTO a small, regional airport an hour later. A private jet was waiting. It wasn't Father's plane. Unease again crept into my gut.

Di and Flint parked our vehicles near the hanger. The sound of the jet's idling engines sounded through the air. Other than our plane, the runway was empty.

The pilot stood on the tarmac, apparently waiting for us. He appeared to be a middle aged, African American man. Di approached him, leaving the rest of us behind.

I couldn't hear what they said, but I did know he wasn't our pilot, Greg. My palms dampened with sweat as my stomach again clenched.

We unloaded our bags from the vehicles. Everyone grabbed what was theirs before walking to the jet.

"Can we trust him?" I asked Flint.

"I don't know. The less he knows, the better. I'm guessing Father rented the plane, which means this pilot was hired last minute. This guy could be anyone."

"We need to tell everyone that."

"Di will. Don't worry."

Everyone boarded the plane quietly. It seemed the shock of what happened was only just setting in. I eyed Susannah warily. The other time we'd been on a plane, she'd been drugged. I didn't know how she'd react to the small space.

Once we were all seated and buckled, the pilot secured the door and ducked into the cockpit. The plane was small, only single seats by each window. Flint and I sat across from each other and everyone else either gazed out the windows or stared into space.

Edgar seemed to have similar concerns to me. He had Susannah sit down and buckled her in before sitting across from her. I caught a few words as he chattered. Susannah leaned back in her chair and stared out the window. At least she seemed calm.

Di sat behind me. I turned to face her. "Where are we going?"

"California." She clicked her seat belt, the noise audible in the quiet. Her short, dark hair bobbed by her chin when she wiggled to adjust her shirt. As always, she wore all black.

"What's in California?"

"You'll see."

Normally, Di's cryptic reply would have made me groan in frustration, but this time, I merely nodded and turned back around. I bit my lip again. The runway moved slowly by my window as the pilot steered us toward the runway.

"Hey." Flint's tone was quiet. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, totally fine. Just tired."

Once again, he didn’t look convinced.

“We should get some sleep.” I closed my eyes before he could ask another question. It didn’t sit well with me, however, the worry that coated his gaze. I never shut him out. He was who I always turned to, but how could I possibly explain to him that I’d almost killed two men without a moment’s hesitation? And that last week, I’d almost done the same thing to Marcus? Or that tonight, when those two men threatened him, I turned into a person I didn’t recognize?

What kind of person does that make me? If I didn’t have a colored cloud, would my cloud be gray? Even black?

My heart clenched. Maybe I wasn’t as good of a person as I thought I was.

I tried to force those thoughts down as we lifted into the sky.

WE LANDED TWO hours later at San Francisco International Airport. The sun crested the horizon and bathed the sky in red. Planes flew every which way even at this early hour.

Thankfully, Susannah had been fine on the journey. The one time I’d got up to use the bathroom, I passed her seat. She sat serenely, staring out the window, that faraway look in her eyes. It only then struck me that she probably felt safe and at home in the sky.

When we finally disembarked, cool air with patches of fog in the distance greeted us. I spent a second watching the distant ocean. I’d only seen the ocean once before, when I went on my trip with Father to Washington state seven years ago. So much was still so new to me.

A large van and SUV were waiting for us, the doors unlocked and keys in the ignitions. The pilot helped load our bags into the vehicles before wishing us well. He obviously had no idea what our travels entailed, since at the moment, we were on the run from a powerful pharmaceutical company that either wanted us dead or back in their labs. Not exactly your typical vacation.

Regardless, we all waved, smiled and thanked him for his time. To him, we were probably a bunch of rich college kids on a pre-Christmas trip. If only that were true.

We all huddled together and waited for the pilot to climb aboard the plane before we spoke. As I shivered in the morning cold, I realized I’d

forgotten my jacket. I grumbled at my usual disorganization and forgetfulness.

Typical.

I inched closer to Flint, absorbing some of his body heat. He shrugged his jacket off and put it around me. When I tried to protest, he just crossed his arms.

Mumbling a thank you, I slipped it on.

I felt his heavy gaze on me. I knew he could tell something was up. The entire flight I'd barely spoken to him, but how could I? What could I say? *Hey, guess what. Turns out I may not be such a good person after all. And it just might be that I'm just as bad as Marcus' men. Apparently, I don't see anything wrong with hurting people either.*

I wasn't ready to face that reality, and I certainly wasn't ready to see potential shock on Flint's face. I'd never been violent growing up. It was a side of me that was as new to me as it would be to him. A side he could very possibly not love.

When the pilot finally left, Mica was the first to speak. "Do you think they could track Luke in the sky?"

Di nodded. "Probably. I'm assuming it's a GPS."

"So Marcus knows we're here," Jet said.

"Most likely." Di's comment got a few uneasy glances among us. Only Susannah didn't seem worried.

"Look, I don't want to get anyone else caught." Luke shuffled his feet, his large bulk towering over Susannah who stood silently beside him. "I'll take off, lead them in a different direction, and you all go and get out of here."

Jacinda shook her head. Her honey-brown eyes blazed. "Absolutely not!"

Di nodded. "That's not how we work, Luke. We're going to take that tracking device out of you, not leave you on your own."

"But how are you going to do that?" Luke waved at our surroundings. "It's not like we can do that here."

"Actually, that's why we flew here," Di replied. "I called Father to tell him about the device in you. He suggested we fly here. Father has an outside contact with access to a full medical unit. You're having surgery this morning."

"I am?" Luke's eyes widened. "Who's my surgeon?"

Di met his gaze. “I am.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Luke balked. “Don’t take this the wrong way, since I know you’re a very capable woman, but how much practice do you have doing surgery?”

I nudged him, glad for the distraction. “She fixed me.”

Luke’s golden eyes narrowed in my direction.

“After I fell off a horse, I got a bit beat up. Di put me back together, so to speak. It wasn’t surgery, but she knows what she’s doing.”

Di crossed her arms. “Conroy will also be in the operating room, as well as a friend of his who’s a general surgeon. I’ll be predominantly performing the surgery. However, he’ll be there to assist me as needed. You’ll be in good hands.”

Luke still didn’t look convinced. “Aren’t we in a hurry then? If Marcus knows we’re here, and you and I are going to be holed up in surgery, shouldn’t we get moving?”

“At the moment, yes, he knows where we are,” Di replied. “But the other good thing about this lab is that your tracking device won’t work in it. And since we don’t want Marcus to know where the lab *is*, you’ll be riding in a special box to get there. That should keep everyone safe since once you get in that box, the signal will drop. So Marcus will see that we landed, but he won’t know where we went from here.”

“A special *box*?” Luke’s eyebrows rose.

Di nodded toward the vehicles. “It’s in the van.”

Luke shook his head. “How the hell do you people think up these things?”

“That’s kind of what she does,” Mica said dryly. “She thinks things up. If Di’s in charge, like she said, you’re in good hands.”

“I hope so,” Luke muttered. “Since those hands will be cutting me open.”

THE BOX LUKE was supposed to climb into was basically a coffin. He hesitated at its edge. “And this came from where?”

“The facility we’re going to.” Di ran her hand along the smooth metal. “It’s normally used to transport radioactive materials. However, it’s also big enough for a person.” She eyed Luke. “Well, most people.”

Everyone studied the box. I shuddered at the thought of being sealed inside.

The werewolf still hesitated at its edge. “So I just . . . climb in?”

“Yes, and don’t forget your oxygen.” Di handed him a mask and small tank.

Luke’s face paled.

Di turned on the tank. A quiet hiss followed.

“How long until we reach the lab?” Jacinda wrapped her arms around her body. In a turquoise vest, designer jeans and stylish boots, she looked flawless as usual. Only she could pull that look off while running from our home in the early hours of the morning. I briefly glanced at my wrinkled jeans and long-sleeved T-shirt. At least they were clean.

Di put on sunglasses. “It’s about an hour, maybe longer if the traffic’s bad.”

Luke took a deep breath before climbing into the box. It looked to be solid metal with two inch thick sides all around. He lay down, having to wedge his shoulders to fit. The lid sat at the side.

He growled. “Let’s get a move on then.”

Flint bent his knees and lifted the cover. A rip sounded. Flint muttered something and set the lid back down. Rolling his T-shirt sleeve up, he tore off the half ripped bandage.

My eyes widened as nervous energy bubbled up inside me. However, what lay under the bandage immediately put me at ease.

A red, shallow, obviously healing wound flashed before Flint rolled his sleeve back down. His lips tugged up when he caught my expression. “I told you it was fine.”

I let out a sigh of relief.

After getting his body situated, Flint lifted the lid, apparently happier now that the bandage didn’t hinder his movements. The screeching sound the lid made, as it slid across the box’s surface, got a wince out of me. Luke’s widening eyes were the last thing I saw before he disappeared from view.

Di marched to the van’s driver door. “Everyone get in the vehicles and take a seat.”

I glanced one last time at the sealed boxed containing our new friend. Jacinda's eyes lingered on it even longer.

Di and Flint once again drove. Growing up, we'd learned most of our skills from simulations Father had brought back to our cabin in the Forbidden Hills. I'd only driven an actual car a few times, although I'd driven the simulation car hundreds of times. Still, it wasn't the same. The computer teaching tool couldn't recreate everything that went with daily driving. Maybe someday I'd be more competent at handling a car, but that was one more thing I could add to the list of things to do after Marcus was no longer a threat.

In other words, in a distant future life if I ever got that lucky.

The traffic going into San Francisco was busier than any other place we'd been, even Chicago. Di gripped the wheel tightly, her knuckles white. I sat beside my sister since I opted for the van with Di, Jacinda, Luke and Susannah.

Jacinda was a bit of a wreck. She kept looking over her shoulder at the large box holding Luke. We had no way of communicating with him, other than taking the top off, but if we did that, his GPS signal would be picked up. In other words, I hoped he was okay. If his oxygen depleted, we could be opening the box to a dead werewolf. Of course, I didn't mention that to Jacinda.

"Do you think he's okay?" she asked for what felt like the hundredth time.

"He'll be fine." I patted her hand. "We're almost there. Now turn around. Looking at that box isn't helping."

A few minutes later, Di steered the van off the interstate into a business park. Large warehouses and companies in huge buildings dominated the streets. She followed the directions on her smart phone. The computerized voice told her the destination was on our right three hundred feet ahead. Jacinda, once again, cast an anxious look at the box.

We pulled into an underground parking area. The tires screeched around the sharp turns. My eyes widened when I saw two figures standing by an industrial looking elevator in the lower level.

One of them was Father.

Di maneuvered the van around a turn. She then backed up so we could open the rear doors right in front of the elevator. Flint steered the car he

drove into a parking spot. We all stepped out of the vehicles. Scents of exhaust hovered in the air.

Father looked incredibly relieved when he greeted us. He hugged Di first and then everyone else. I loved the feel of his soft shirt and his subtle scent of mint and soap when he pulled me close. Father even hugged Edgar, who blushed. I wondered if Edgar had been hugged before. When Father approached Susannah, however, she took a quick step back and dashed behind the van.

Edgar again kicked into action. He approached her and held out his hand.

Susannah darted to his side.

Father sighed sadly before nodding toward the other man. “This is Dr. Frank Spacey.”

Dr. Spacey looked to be around Father’s age. He still had a full head of hair, and his build was trim. Sharp eyes appraised all of us before he held out his hand for everyone to shake.

“How do they know each other?” Jacinda murmured to me under her breath.

“No idea.” Father’s outside contacts were one of the greatest mysteries to me.

After the introductions were complete, Father waved at an industrial strength cart by the elevator. He didn’t have to ask. We all knew who would lift the box.

Flint pulled the box Luke was still in to the back of the van. Bending down, he awkwardly put his arms around it before lifting it onto the transport cart. He strained, a little, but considering the box probably weighed over a thousand pounds, it was pretty impressive.

Dr. Spacey’s eyes widened considerably when Flint lowered the box. The floor vibrated when he let it fall the last half inch. I had no idea how much Father had told Dr. Spacey about us.

“Let’s get him inside.” There was urgency in Jacinda’s voice.

Di nodded curtly, and Flint pushed the cart into the elevator. We all crammed in beside it. I was surprised by the smell in the confined area. A heavy disinfectant hung in the air, similar to a hospital.

Biting my lip, I wondered what exactly this facility was just as the elevator doors closed.

CHAPTER EIGHT

When the elevator doors finally opened, Jacinda was practically biting her fingernails off.

Di placed a hand on her shoulder. “Relax. He has enough oxygen for six hours.”

Jacinda didn’t look convinced. “I can barely hear anything through that box. I can’t pick up his breathing or heart rate.”

“He’s fine,” Di replied.

The elevator opened to a large hallway. I didn’t know what to expect, but a vacant hall was not it. Dim, nighttime lights illuminated the area. Flint pushed the cart forward and stopped once it was completely out of the elevator. The rest of us crowded around it.

Jacinda eyed the box. “You said his tracking device won’t pick up in here?”

Dr. Spacey shook his head. “No, not in these walls. They’re lined with lead.”

Anxiety grew in Jacinda’s voice. “Can we get him out?”

Flint grasped the two inch thick cover. His muscles bunched and strained, making him look sexy as hell, but he still lifted the massive lid easily. It made a loud clang when it hit the floor. It also left a noticeable dent. I wondered if the entire box was made of solid lead.

Inside, Luke lay as still as stone, his eyes closed, the mask still over his face. His wide shoulders were hunched together, his arms crossed over his chest.

My eyes widened. He looked dead.

“Is he okay?” Jacinda practically screeched.

I gave him a rough shove. “Luke!”

Luke’s eyes flashed open, a bewildered look on his face. He slowly sat up. Pulling the mask off, he rubbed his eyes. “I take it we’re here?”

“Were you *sleeping*?” Jacinda screeched.

Luke nodded his head and scratched his chin. “Not much else to do in there. It helped that I was tired.”

Jacinda crossed her arms and harrumphed. “And all this time I’ve been worrying about you for nothing?”

He gave her a crooked smile. “You were worried about me, beautiful?”

With an annoyed hair flip, she glanced away.

Luke placed his hands on the box and vaulted over the side. He yawned loudly and stretched. His massive frame looked even bigger with his muscular arms reaching overhead.

Dr. Spacey stared, wide eyed.

“Luke, this is Dr. Spacey.” Father waved the introductions. “He’ll be in the operating room with us.”

The doctor held out his hand for Luke to shake. Luke just stared at it.

Mica leaned over and hissed, “You’re supposed to shake his hand.”

“Oh, right.” Luke grasped the doctor’s palm. “I think I saw that in a movie once.”

The werewolf awkwardly shook the doctor’s hand and pumped it up and down a little more forcefully than necessary. It reminded me how little Edgar, Susannah and Luke knew about social rules. I was by no means an expert in social interaction, but the norms Father had taught us growing up helped immensely. There was still a lot the three newest members in our family hadn’t experienced.

Dr. Spacey dropped Luke’s hand. “We better get moving. Follow me.”

Father followed him first. The rest of us trailed behind. Flint and I naturally gravitated toward one another, like we always did. His hand clasped mine. The feel of his warm, rough palm helped my anxiety. The entire wing of this building felt strange, yet I couldn’t place why. Empty patient rooms lined the hallway. There had to be at least a dozen.

I peered inside one of the rooms. A hospital bed surrounded by monitoring equipment appeared. I looked in a few more rooms, and it finally hit me why something didn’t feel right.

There were no windows.

I eyed the walls. “What’s this placed used for?”

Dr. Spacey glanced over his shoulder but didn’t stop. “Research.”

The *tap tap* of all of our soles hitting the linoleum floor echoed.

“Research for what?” Mica’s brown hair brushed just below her shoulders as she glanced into rooms.

“Originally, this wing was used to test medical equipment our company’s piloting. We make devices and equipment to fix common medical problems,” Dr. Spacey replied.

“Why no windows?” Jet asked. The twins’ faces were making those strange expressions when they spoke telepathically.

Dr. Spacey reached a hall and turned. “For privacy. Some of our methods aren’t completely conventional.”

I almost stopped mid-stride. Flint paused beside me, his hand going to the small of my back. A chill ran through me. Memories surfaced of my time at O’Brien. For the most part, those memories were fuzzy, although a few were clear. One thing I remembered very clearly?

There were no windows there either.

I shook that thought off. If Father trusted Dr. Spacey, than I did too. I gave Flint what I hoped was a reassuring smile and continued on.

Dr. Spacey stopped outside a room after we turned down another hallway. This one had double doors. “We’ll be doing your operation here, but first we’ll need imaging to locate where the tracking device is implanted.”

“Okay.” Luke stuffed his hands in his pockets and shuffled his feet. “What do you need me to do?”

“Just follow my instructions. We’ll get a series of x-rays. If that doesn’t reveal where it is, we may need a CT.”

Luke just nodded. “Whatever you say.”

“Diamond?” Dr. Spacey turned toward her. “Conroy told me you’d like to perform the operation?”

Di stood up straighter, her expression eager. “Yes.”

“In that case, Luke, Diamond and Conroy, follow me. The rest of you can wait at the end of that hallway.” Dr. Spacey waved back to where we’d come from. “You’ll find beverages and refreshments in that area. Please stay there until we return. It’s imperative that you don’t leave this wing.”

He turned to leave, but Jacinda called out, “Wait! How long will this take?”

Luke gave her a wolfish grin. “Worried again, beautiful?”

She ignored him.

“The imaging won’t take longer than twenty minutes, even if we need a CT,” Dr. Spacey replied. “However, it may take a while to locate the device when I review the results. Once we locate it, the operation could take

as little as an hour to several hours. It depends on how deeply it's implanted and where."

Jacinda frowned and crossed her arms tightly over her chest.

Luke pulled her to him.

Jacinda's eyes widened. Luke kissed her on the cheek before whispering something in her ear. She blushed.

I watched the interaction with wide eyes. If there was one thing that was becoming obvious, it was that my sister was head over heels.

"I'll see you when I'm back." Luke nodded to everyone after he let Jacinda go.

Father, Di, Dr. Spacey and Luke disappeared through the double doors. I tried to catch a glimpse of what was inside, but the doors shut too quickly.

For a minute, we all just stood there. Jasper inched forward and made a move to open a door, but Flint interjected. "We're to wait in the room down the hall. Let's go."

Jasper rolled his eyes. "You never were any fun."

Flint's expression didn't change, but the energy off him increased. In some ways, we were still the children we'd been ten years ago. The twins liked breaking the rules. Flint insisted on following them. I wondered if that would ever change.

Probably not.

"Come on, J." Mica pulled Jasper.

He hooked his arm around her shoulders, and they strolled back to where we'd come from. Amber, Edgar, Jacinda and Jet did the same. Only Susannah didn't move. She stood rooted to the spot, staring at the room Luke had disappeared into.

When I approached her, she didn't move. It almost seemed as if she didn't know I was there. Her bright blue eyes once again held that faraway look. I tentatively touched her forearm.

When our skin made contact, her pupils dilated. She shrieked and jumped backward. With wide, frightened eyes, she met my gaze while wrapping her arms tightly around herself.

I let go and slowly stepped back. "Flint? Can you get Edgar?"

Before I finished my sentence, Flint raced off in a blur down the hallway. The others had already rounded the corner, their voices carrying faintly.

That left me alone with the eagle. “Susannah? I’m not going to hurt you, and nobody’s going to hurt Luke.”

She continued watching me, a distrustful gleam in her eyes. Her irises flashed yellow.

“My name’s Lena, remember?” I lowered my voice. “We rescued you from O’Brien, and you’ve been living with us ever since. We’re just like you, remember?”

Susannah moved so fast, I didn’t react in time. She had one of the double doors open, about to barrel through. I grabbed her arm.

“Luke!” Her quiet voice turned into a murderous scream. “Luke!”

I grabbed her with both hands and tried to pull her back. She was so strong! I put all of my body weight into it. She didn’t budge.

Her free arm swung as she clawed me.

A sting and flash of blood followed but I barely registered it as footsteps sounded behind me. Flint’s scent came next. Another scent carried in the air. Aftershave and a hint of musk.

Edgar.

“Suzie, love, what you on about?”

Susannah didn’t seem to see him. She was still trying to run through the doors.

Edgar grabbed her and pulled her back. He wrapped both arms around her, pinning her from behind.

She clawed wildly but when Edgar yelled an expletive, she stopped, as if sensing who it was.

“Luke’ll be o’right.” His words were soft and soothing as he continued to hold her. “He’ll be just fine.” He continued to say quiet, comforting words. At least a minute passed before he loosened his grip. “Come on now, love. Me finks you need a nice cuppa and a biscuit.”

She stilled, but her eyes flashed yellow again, her breathing rapid.

Edgar turned her to face him. “He’s fine, Suzie. He’s just fine. No one’s gonna ‘urt ‘im ‘ere. Now, come on, love.”

Her frightened eyes darted to the double doors again. Once again, her head moved at unnatural speed.

Edgar led her slowly away. Thankfully, she didn’t put up a fight. Flint and I stood where we were, letting Edgar put some distance between us. As much as I was trying to befriend Susannah, it didn’t seem she wanted anything to do with me.

I surveyed my hand and winced. A trail of blood ran down my wrist.

“She did that?” Flint’s deep voice seemed to echo in the hall.

“I grabbed her. You can hardly blame her.”

He sighed deeply. “She’s making things a lot harder. We can’t trust her. Ever.”

“Yeah, I know.”

After a trip to the bathroom, my wound stopped bleeding. It wasn’t deep, but it still stung.

“Come on.” Flint guided me away, his large arm settling around my shoulders.

The gesture made the sleeves on his jacket fall below my hands. It was only then I realized I still wore his coat. It had probably saved me from a nastier gash. If I hadn’t been wearing it, Susannah would have probably clawed up my arm.

“What a morning.” I sighed.

His dark eyes glinted when he glanced down at me. “Let’s get something to eat.”

My mouth watered. “Good idea.”

THE DAY PASSED slowly. We all waited on the uncomfortable, vinyl chairs in the small, windowless waiting area. Without the sun, it could have been late afternoon or early evening for all I knew.

“What time is it?” I asked Jacinda.

Only Jacinda and Jet had the foresight to put on their watches before we left that morning. Normally, we all wore watches to hide our tattoos that Father tattooed on us almost eight months ago. None of us knew who Marcus had searching the country for us, and our tattoos were one way to identify us, if he even knew about the symbols.

She glanced at her watch. “Eleven in the morning.”

My eyes widened. “Eleven in the *morning*?”

“We’ve only been waiting *three* hours?” Amber exclaimed.

The food and beverages Dr. Spacey provided had disappeared the second we sat down. There were a few bottles of water left, but that was it. There weren’t any magazines, televisions or the usual distracting paraphernalia normally found in waiting areas. This wing obviously hadn’t been used in a long time.

Another hour ticked by. I was lounging against the wall, one ankle crossed over the other, when distant voices sounded outside the room. Flint straightened. Everyone else perked up.

Jacinda bolted out of her chair. “It’s Father.”

Footsteps approached. A moment later, Dr. Spacey and Father appeared. Both wore scrubs. Blue surgical caps covered their heads. Luke was nowhere to be seen.

“Where is he?” Jacinda practically screeched.

“Recovering.” Father pulled his mask off. “Diamond’s still with him, monitoring his vitals and pain levels.”

“So, he’s okay?” Jacinda wrung her hands.

Dr. Spacey nodded. “He’ll be fine. He’ll have a small scar on his abdomen when he fully heals, but other than that, he should return to normal.”

Mica’s curious brown eyes lit up. “Where was the tracking device?”

“Beside his liver.” Father stuffed the scrub cap in his pocket. “It was encapsulated in scar tissue and beside an artery, so it took longer than we anticipated to remove, but Diamond did very well.”

Jacinda’s energy grew stronger with each second. “When can I see him?”

“You can all see him now, if you’d like.” Father turned. “Follow me.”

CHAPTER NINE

Di stood beside Luke as he lay on a hospital bed. Monitoring equipment surrounded him. The soft *beep beep* of a machine filled the air. His heartbeat was slow and steady, while an IV dripped something into his vein.

Luke smiled drunkenly when we approached. We all circled around the bed.

“Hey, s’guys,” he slurred. When his eyes found Jacinda’s, he leered. “You’re sure looking beautiful today. Have I’s ever told you that?”

Jacinda glanced worriedly at Di. “What’s wrong with him?”

“It’s the anesthesia. It’ll wear off soon. Don’t worry.”

A machine sounded, a loud hum, and the blood pressure cuff started to swell on Luke’s arm. Luke continued to say nonsensical things that half the time sounded more like gibberish than English.

Jacinda took his hand.

Luke lifted it to his mouth and kissed it. “I’d like to do a lot more than that to’ve you.”

Jacinda’s eyes widened as she snatched her hand back.

Jasper laughed and clapped his brother on the back. “What were you saying about wolf pups the other day, Jet?”

Jacinda glanced sharply his way, but Mica laughed too.

Di, on the other hand, told everyone if they didn’t have anything specific to say to Luke that we could all kindly return to the waiting area.

I eyed the clock. “How much longer is this going to take?”

“At least the rest of the afternoon.” Di didn’t look up from her clipboard while she studied Luke’s vitals and wrote things down. “If he’s able to walk, urinate and tolerate the pain by tonight, we can get back on the road.”

“Where are we going from here?” Amber stood at the foot of the bed, eyeing all of the lines connected to Luke.

Father cleared his throat. “We’ll discuss that later.”

Dr. Spacey stood behind everyone, watching the interactions with a curious glint in his eye. A part of me wanted to ask him how much he knew about us. Considering he was one of Father's outside contacts and had just assisted in an operation to remove a GPS tracking device from a large werewolf, I guessed he knew plenty.

"Does anyone else have anything to say to Luke?" Di frowned heavily at Jet when the twin lifted a medication off a tray table to read its contents.

Flint crossed his arms. "Where's the tracking device?"

Dr. Spacey retrieved it from a corner table. He held up a plastic tube. In it was a small, metallic circular device. It was still bloody and looked like a bullet but smoother.

Flint's gaze narrowed. "What are you going to do with it?"

"Destroy it," the doctor replied.

Flint shook his head. "Don't. I have an idea." He nudged his sister. "Di? Can I speak with you and Conroy?"

Dr. Spacey stepped forward. "I'll take care of Luke."

Di, Father and Flint disappeared from the room. The rest of us shuffled around Luke, the twins and Mica joking, Jacinda scolding them, while Amber giggled through it all. Everyone in our original family played their roles so well. Di and Flint had always been the leaders in our group. I'd always been the one trying to include everyone. We all had our place.

But you were never the violent one. You were never the one who so easily and willingly hurt others.

I swallowed tightly and stuffed my hands in my pockets as images of how violently I'd hurt Marcus and his two men once again threatened to suffocate me.

BY EIGHT O'CLOCK that night, the anesthetic had worn off and Luke was up and walking. They'd moved him to one of the patient rooms earlier that afternoon. Despite Luke not wanting to take pain meds, Di insisted, even though Luke growled every time she brought it up.

"I don't need medication. I'm fine!"

"Take them." Di held out the pills. "I'm not asking. We need you walking and moving comfortably. You're not going to be able to do that unless you're taking pain pills."

With a growl, he snatched the medications and downed them in one swallow. He refused the water glass she held up.

“Happy?” he asked.

“I suppose,” she replied coolly.

At the moment, all of us crowded inside his room. It was still only our family and Dr. Spacey. Nobody else had visited the wing. The hallway outside was like a tomb. Sounds echoed down it, and the dim nighttime lighting only increased its eeriness.

“So where do we go from here?” Mica stood beside Jasper, their fingers intertwined.

“We’re staying here,” Flint said.

“In this lab?” Jet asked incredulously.

Di shook her head. “No, in San Francisco.”

I put a hand on my hip. “But Marcus knows we’re here.”

“That’s why we’re staying,” Flint replied. “We’re going to use the tracking device they took out of Luke to lure him to us.”

Jasper’s eyebrows shot up. “And *why* would we want to do that?”

“Yeah,” Jet added. “I thought we were trying to get *away* from him.”

Di eyed Flint. “We want to learn more about the people working for Marcus and what they’re capable of. The best way to do that is to capture one, if not a few, of Marcus’ men.”

Amber stepped closer to my side, her arms tightly crossed. “And do what with them?”

Flint’s energy increased. “Get information.”

I shuddered. “You mean interrogate them.”

Di nodded. “Yes, we’ll question them.

I shoved my hands in my pockets. “And to think we had ten of them in Arizona.”

Di sighed heavily. “I know, I thought that too, but at that time, we weren’t prepared. Escaping seemed the safest option, but now, we have the upper hand. We can lure them to us. We’re more in control of the situation.”

The room suddenly felt cold. I shivered. “And if they don’t talk?”

“I’ll get them to talk.” Luke’s eyes glowed. Golden liquid swirled in their depths. “I’d love that opportunity.”

WE LEFT THE medical unit just after ten that night. I asked why we couldn’t stay, since the building seemed so safe, but Dr. Spacey said that wasn’t an option. The wing Luke recovered in was to be used on Monday. I assumed from the clandestine way Dr. Spacey spoke that none of his

associates knew he was helping Father. And from the way Father insisted we leave well before Monday morning, I guessed I was right.

Father booked rooms at a local hotel. Since Marcus knew we were in San Francisco, he probably had men in the city. Therefore, we were to check-in in groups of two to three, in hopes of drawing less attention to ourselves. There were still a lot of unknowns, a realization that didn't sit well with me.

Father didn't know how many contacts Marcus had in the area, or how deep those contacts went. If Marcus had friends in law enforcement, he'd possibly have access to security information. To try and avoid detection, we all put on hats and sunglasses. To wear sunglasses at nighttime was definitely unusual, but not so eccentric that people would stare. However, the hats and sunglasses helped us avoid facial recognition software programs. If Marcus had accessed security cameras in Chicago, it was possible he knew what we looked like. We knew for sure the police had a screen shot of Di from what the news showed. Who knew what else they had.

The bottom line—avoiding detection was key.

"Is this really necessary?" Mica slapped on a baseball cap and aviator sunglasses.

"Hopefully not." Di smoothed her cap over her head. "But we're not taking any chances."

We took the elevator down to the lower parking level. Luke walked gingerly behind us, his demeanor grouchy. He kept grumbling about how hungry he was, but every time Di slowed and tried to give him a hand, he growled and brushed her off.

Di said it would take four to six weeks for his incision to fully heal. That seemed like too long. We couldn't hole up in a hotel for a month and hoped nobody found us. Luke was going to have to move quickly whether he liked it or not. Hopefully, his sutures wouldn't burst.

When we reached the parking garage, I automatically walked to the van we'd driven from the airport.

Only, it wasn't there.

"Galena," Father called. "Those vehicles have been disposed of."

I shook my head. "Right. Of course."

I once again wondered how many people around the country were on Father's payroll. It was the same after Chicago. When we'd driven to the

airport to fly back to Arizona, a man had appeared on the tarmac, as if coming from the shadows. Father had whispered to him before giving him the van's keys.

That was the last time anyone saw the van. The news clips I'd seen since then indicated the police had no leads, including never having found the escape vehicle. I wouldn't be surprised if the van we'd driven was currently at the bottom of Lake Michigan.

I returned to Father's side. "Do you still have the money to pay your . . . uh . . . people?"

His hazel eyes appeared tired. "For the time being, yes. My overseas accounts are still secure. If everything goes to plan, my U.S. accounts should be transferred to more secure banks by the end of the week."

"Did you find out how Marcus accessed them?"

"It was as I expected. He knows several board members in two of the banks I use. They're behind my frozen accounts."

I rubbed my hands on my arms, wishing again I hadn't forgotten a jacket. "Isn't that illegal?"

"It's most definitely illegal."

"But how did Marcus know those accounts belonged to you?" I asked the question with hesitation. Father had always been so reluctant to divulge any information about his outside life. I knew it was to protect us, but I wasn't a kid anymore. I wanted to know.

"That I can't tell you, but perhaps I was careless during my last excursion. A security camera may have detected me. I'm not sure, but I do know Marcus is actively engaged in finding us now. That wasn't the case prior to rescuing Luke, Susannah and Edgar."

Di tapped her foot. "We should really get going."

Father threw keys to Di and Flint, effectively ending our conversation. "Four people per car. We're all to take different routes to reach the hotel. Follow the GPS instructions I've programmed into your vehicles. Do not remove your hats."

Flint, Jacinda, Luke and I slid into one car. It was a new Volvo. The soft, leather seats were smooth and comfortable. Flint took the driver's seat, I sat on the front passenger's side, while Jacinda and Luke climbed into the back. Our small bags easily fit in the trunk.

Di, the twins and Mica took the Toyota, while Father, Amber, Edgar and Susannah opened the doors to a Lexus. Susannah stayed close to

Edgar’s side. Luckily, the otter seemed to have a calming influence on her.

When Flint turned on the engine, a screen on the dash came to life. Sure enough, a pre-programmed GPS glowed with driving instructions to the hotel. Even though these cars were more modest than what Father usually bought, my guess to not draw attention, they were still extremely nice.

“You guys sure travel in style.” Luke ran his hand along the interior.

“You know a thing or two about cars?” I was surprised that he knew a Volvo was a somewhat expensive vehicle. The only reason I knew that was because of our Transportation class in our homeschooling. If Father hadn’t taught us, I wouldn’t have known the difference between a Kia and a Porsche.

“I’ve seen movies,” Luke said defensively. “I’m not completely ignorant.”

I turned in my seat to face him. “Did you watch a lot of movies in O’Brien?”

Luke fiddled with his seatbelt. “Yeah. They’d let us gather in a lab sometimes, and we’d all watch movies together. There was a projection screen, and we’d bring out our blankets and lay on the floor. One of the techs, she was pretty nice. She’s the one who always brought the movies. Sometimes, when Marcus and Albert weren’t there, she’d snuggle with us and bring snacks and drinks.” Luke’s brow furrowed. “I haven’t seen her in years.”

My throat constricted. I imagined a dozen kids crowded in an underground lab watching movies together and soaking up the love and affection from a single research tech. A part of me was relieved their lives hadn’t been devoid of any love and kindness. The other part felt sick that a simple movie was probably the highlight of their childhood. It was so opposite to how we’d been raised. Father had showered us with love. I tried to picture a life without that.

I couldn’t.

With a squeal of tires, Flint drove out of the garage onto the dark, barren street. Rain fell on the windshield. The dark sky and somber weather seemed fitting considering what we’d just been discussing.

I glanced out the back windshield. Nobody else was on the road. Neither Di nor Father followed. They’d wait at least thirty minutes before

leaving. We were all to arrive at the hotel at spaced out times and check-in separately. Flint and I would check-in first.

I turned back around to face Flint. His chestnut hair looked darker in the night. “So where’s the tracking device?”

Flint flipped on the windshield wipers. “Conroy has it.”

My eyes widened.

“Don’t worry. It’s contained in a lead box. We won’t remove it until we want to lure Marcus’ men.”

“And then what?”

“And then, we wait.”

THE HOTEL WE checked into was close to Fisherman’s Wharf. Lights from restaurants and shops filled the streets. People walked on the sidewalks, laughing and talking, their faces partly hidden behind umbrellas and rain gear. Nobody seemed to mind the rain that splattered the ground.

Flint pulled down a side street, looking for a place to temporarily park. Father chose this hotel because it offered self-parking underground in addition to valet parking. He didn’t want us using the valets, and since we didn’t have access to the underground parking lot yet, we needed to find a spot on the street.

We eventually found one as someone backed out of a spot in front of a restaurant. I silently thanked the fact that we weren’t in the van. Parking that thing down here would have been a nightmare.

Jacinda and Luke didn’t say much when we left, just that they’d wait fifteen minutes before following us to the hotel.

Humid, cold air greeted me when I stepped out of the car onto the street. It smelled invigorating and fresh after all of the time in the medical unit. Another pang of sadness filled me when I remembered those children in O’Brien who’d lived daily with stale lab air. Those that had died had never experienced anything different.

I did my best to shake those thoughts off and instead remembered what Frida, a woman I’d befriended during my homeless months, had taught me. Enjoy the moment. Take pleasure in what you have. We’d all learned to enjoy simplicity when growing up in hiding in the mountains, yet my four months of homeless life had driven it into me like nothing else. When one had nothing, simple pleasures were all one could enjoy.

“Ready?” Flint asked.

He pulled his jacket collar up while I lifted the hood on my sweatshirt. At least I hadn't forgotten a sweatshirt and had the foresight to retrieve it before we left the medical unit. I knew sooner or later, I'd have to buy a jacket, but this would have to do for now.

I clasped Flint's hand and carried my bag in the other. We walked quickly down the street. I switched my vision. Clouds appeared around those we passed. I had no idea if the men employed by Marcus had ever been experimented on, but if they had, their clouds would have colors. Spotting colored clouds, especially at night, was easy. They flowed around a person's shoulders, bright and glowing, like a lighthouse penetrating through the night.

"Are you watching?" Flint asked.

"Yes."

"See anything?"

"Nope, everyone's normal."

We were mostly wet by the time we arrived at the hotel. It wasn't exactly a good look when we walked into the impressive lobby.

Despite our sorry looking appearance, an employee opened the door and greeted us. I smiled brightly from under my cap although Flint didn't even glance at him. I knew Flint was worried. He'd been tense ever since we left the medical unit, so I wasn't surprised when he strode straight for the check-in desk in long, purposeful strides.

The woman behind the desk greeted us brightly, but her eyes grew wide when she got a good look at us. I'm sure seeing two soaked individuals in hats and sunglasses at ten at night wasn't normal.

I took off my glasses.

Flint sucked in a breath. I subtly brushed against him when a wave of power rolled off him. My gesture did little to reassure him, and while I wasn't sure that I'd made the right move either, I figured my hat would still hide my face from any cameras. Besides, making an impression by appearing too secretive wasn't a good idea.

Power continued to radiate from Flint's core. I welled up my energy, creating a protective bubble around me, and shielded myself from the wave after wave that came from Flint.

I rested my forearms on the counter. "Two checking in."

"Name?" The woman seemed to visibly relax after I took off my glasses.

“Melanie Winters.” I pulled out the fake ID Father had made for me weeks ago, just in case anything like this ever happened. Luckily, Flint remembered our IDs. Otherwise, mine would still be buried in my dresser in Arizona.

As the woman took down my information, I fingered the charm bracelet on my wrist that Flint had given me years ago. It was probably the only thing I kept close track of. I still felt ridiculously proud that I hadn’t lost it, even when I woke up in Rapid City eight months ago having no idea who I was.

When the woman handed me back the fake driver’s license, she asked for my credit card. I handed over the black card. She stood up straighter and smiled brighter. I knew it was superficial, but when one has a hundred thousand dollar limit, one tends to be treated differently.

“Is there room service this late?” I asked while she typed away.

“Of course, Ms. Winters.”

After checking us in, she rattled off the other amenities and waved an employee over to carry our bags.

Flint told her that wasn’t necessary.

She visibly balked and took a step back. Despite Flint’s strikingly handsome face, he tended to have that effect on people, especially when he was in his hide and protect mode. From the energy pouring off him, which felt as strong as radiation waves from the sun, I was surprised he hadn’t thrown me over his shoulder and disappeared upstairs.

I tried to ignore the heavy feel of his swirling energy, but even with my cloud wrapped protectively around me, my hand still slipped when I put my credit card back in my wallet.

By the time we got to our room on the fifth floor, Flint was tenser than a tautly pulled rubber band. I knew the others would be arriving over the next two hours, but at the moment, there was only one thing really dominating my thoughts despite Flint’s worry and despite my newfound anxiety over my moral character. Food. We hadn’t eaten anything since the morning.

I picked up the room service menu and winced when the sharp edge brushed the cut Susannah gave me. “Hungry?”

Flint stood at the window, looking out. Rain trickled down the pane against a dark sky. Strong energy still billowed around him.

“Seafood? Burgers? Italian? Thai?” I studied the vast selection. “What sounds good?”

“Whatever.”

I sighed and picked up the phone. It could be a long night.

CHAPTER TEN

Flint had to move the car, and he wanted to make sure everyone got checked in before he finally relaxed. The fact that he had been shot never fazed him. As always, he put the safety of our family before his own needs.

By the time we fell into bed, it was the early hours of the morning. The last thing I remembered was Flint's warm body spooning mine. The next time I opened my eyes, it was morning.

Rain greeted me. I blinked a few times, not sure what I was looking at. The clock beside the bed read just after nine. It took me a second to remember we were in a hotel and the window I stared at overlooked San Francisco.

Flint still slept soundly.

I pushed away from his sleeping form and sat up. Bright white sheets surrounded us. Turning, my breath stopped. A slash of red, the graze from the bullet wound, marred his olive skin. The granulating tissue looked like a war flag promising bloodier battles to come. Seeing it made me grow cold.

Flint had been shot.

I so easily could have lost him.

A fluttering sense of panic followed. I hastily looked away. The thought of life without Flint was incomprehensible. We'd always been together. I couldn't imagine ever *not* being with him. Yet yesterday, he'd been shot, actually *shot*. The knowledge of how precarious life was crawled up my throat.

Flint was shot. I almost lost him.

Taking a deep breath, I closed my eyes and concentrated on calming the panic that wanted to consume me. *Flint's not dead. He's fine. He's absolutely fine.*

I took at least ten deep breaths before the suffocating fear receded. Flint continued to sleep soundly, completely oblivious to the emotions ripping apart my insides.

With one last breath, I silently lifted the sheets and crept across the floor. The carpet was rough feeling under my bare feet. It was that industrial strength kind with short looped ends. It would probably hold up under a herd of elephants.

I padded into the bathroom and closed the door behind me. The fear still lingered, just on the threshold of my mind. It would only take one little step for the numbing, heart stopping feeling to overpower me.

Cold tiles chilled me underfoot when I ripped open the shower curtain. I turned on the shower and stepped under it before it had a chance to warm. The frigid water vanquished any sense of panic. My teeth chattered as I let the water cascade around me. Any thoughts of losing Flint vanished as I focused on the chilling water.

Eventually, the shower warmed. I lowered myself to the floor and wrapped my arms around my knees. At least the cut on my wrist was healing. I tried to relax, to lose myself in the sheer bliss of a hot shower, but my mind wouldn't allow it. Flint's brush with death only highlighted how precarious our situation was. We were fighting to have a normal, peaceful existence. *Fighting* being the only apt word to describe it.

Another worry filled my mind.

An image of me slamming an energy ball onto the two men who shot at Flint hovered just on the edge of my conscience. Sickening doubts followed.

What kind of person does that make me?

I tried to shake off that disturbing thought, and to reassure myself that Flint would always be fine, but no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't.

Sometimes, it was hard for me to comprehend my life. Other than Flint and everyone else in our strange family, I'd never encountered others who were constantly hiding or trying to find a way to live like normal people. And I'd certainly never met anybody who had power like we did. Power that could be dangerous.

Our entire existence had been based on secrecy, and given what we could do, I now truly understood why. Sometimes I wished I could be normal. If Father hadn't stolen us when we were small children, if O'Brien hadn't experimented on us and permanently changed our brain chemistries —we wouldn't have these abilities.

And I wouldn't be able to hurt anyone.

I gripped my knees tighter. Water dripped down my arms. I traced the small tattoo on my left inner wrist. A perfect circle divided into four quarters. The symbol for Earth. The symbol Father had tattooed on me eight months ago when he'd tried to free us from the confines of hiding. When he'd tried to give us normal lives.

I sighed and ran my hands over my wet curls. Ducking my head, I let the water cascade down my back. Rivulets trickled past my toes. Heavy steam filled the room.

The handle squeaked when I turned off the shower. Wrapping a thick, soft towel around myself, I stepped out and tried my best to put my thoughts and worries behind me.

FLINT WAS UP by ten. After he took a quick shower, we ordered room service and sat on the bed in silence while munching toast and eggs. His chestnut-colored hair, still damp from his shower, curled at the ends. His deep-set dark eyes followed my every move.

I nibbled a piece of toast. Despite having not eaten since last night, I didn't have an appetite. Too many things still barreled through my mind.

"Want to talk about it?" Flint finished his coffee and set the cup on the tray.

I curled my legs underneath me and glanced his way. "Hmm?"

"Something's bothering you. A lot. I can tell."

I hastily rearranged my legs and almost tipped over my coffee in the process. "Why do you say that?" I brushed crumbs from the bedspread. It only spread them across the sheets more.

Flint grabbed my hands, stopping my movements. "Babe, talk to me."

Tears clouded my vision. I dipped my chin so he wouldn't see them. "It's nothing. I'm fine."

"You're clearly not fine. You've been anything but fine. What's going on?"

An image of those two men shooting at Flint flashed through my mind. *Flint was shot, and I almost killed those men and I didn't think twice about it.*

"Babe . . . you're shaking." He pulled me close and wrapped his arms around me. His energy picked up, strumming into me. It was filled with worry. "Talk to me. Please."

I swallowed tightly. *I can't. I can't tell him.* He may look at me differently. He may know I'm not the person he thought I was.

He sighed heavily. "Lena? Will you please just tell me?"

His frustrated plea finally broke my barrier. With a hesitant whisper, I began but then the words rushed out of me. "I'm not a good person, Flint! I'm not!"

He pushed me back just enough to see my face. Dark eyes, swimming with confusion regarded me. "What are you talking about?"

"I'm not a good person!"

He wiped a tear off my cheek. His eyes softened. "Yes, you *are* a good person. You're one of the kindest, most compassionate people I know."

I shook my head. Tears fell down my face. "But I'm not. I almost killed those men who shot you. I didn't think twice about it. Rage filled me. *Hate* filled me when I knew they were trying to hurt you. I wanted them to pay. I wanted them to suffer. I wanted to hurt them because they hurt you. Don't you see? A good person wouldn't do something like that, wouldn't *feel* something like that!"

His eyebrows drew together. "You think you're not a good person because you wanted to hurt them?"

I nodded tightly. "And it wasn't the first time." More tears streamed down my cheeks. "When I encountered Marcus at the warehouse, it was the same. I blasted him with an energy ball. He flew at least fifty feet. That could have killed him, and I didn't care. All I could think about was him hurting you and everyone else. I unleashed everything I had on him."

He thumbed another tear away. His energy increased. "Do you know what I would do if someone threatened you? If someone tried to kill you? If someone tried to hurt you?" His eyes hardened. "I'd take them down without a second thought. I would protect you with my life or I would take their life. I'd do it in a second."

I tried to smile but only more tears came. "I know."

"So do you think *I'm* a bad person?"

"No!" I wiped away more tears. "You're the most loyal, fiercely devoted man I've ever met."

He cocked his head. "Yet you don't think I'm bad?"

"Of course not."

"Then why do you think *you are?* What you did is what any of us would have done. You protected me. You protected your family. You did

what you needed to do."

"But I almost *killed* them, and I didn't care."

He took a deep breath. "You're very powerful, it's true. It's easier for you to hurt someone than it is for most of us, but you would never hurt someone who wasn't threatening you. You *reacted*, you didn't act. Do you see the difference?"

I wiped my eyes and sniffed. "Well . . . yeah, I guess so."

"But you're still worried, aren't you? You still think that reacting that way makes you a bad person."

I shrugged. "I can't help but think that."

"What could you have done differently for you to not feel that way?"

Grabbing a tissue, I blotted my eyes and wiped my nose. I sat up straighter. "Well, I guess I would have had more control. That I would have controlled myself enough to incapacitate those men without hurting them."

"So control would have made you feel less guilty?"

I sniffed again. "Yeah, it would have."

He took both of my hands in his. His warm palms felt so good. "Then next time you're in a situation, remember how you're feeling right now. Remember how important it is to you to learn control and not intentionally hurt someone. I still don't think you did anything wrong, and I'll never think you're a bad person no matter how many men you take down, but if it's important to you that you don't kill anyone, practice controlling yourself more."

"You'd really never think I was a bad person?"

"You'd have to kill a whole lot more than a bunch of Marcus' men for me to ever think that. I know you better than anyone, babe. You're good. Nothing you can say will make me think otherwise."

I took a deep breath. Already, I felt the heavy feeling in my chest lightening. "So you don't feel differently about me?"

He tipped my chin up so my eyes met his. "Never."

I continued to think about what he said. Control. Deliberate use of my powers. He was right. If I learned how to control my responses in heightened situations, I wouldn't intentionally hurt someone. *But what if it comes down to killing someone to save Flint or my family?*

I frowned as that possibility sank in, but I already knew the answer. If it was a matter of life or death, I'd do it. I'll kill to protect my family. I'd do the same as Flint.

But am I okay with that?

The only sound was the rain on the window as we sat in silence. I felt Flint watching me. His energy was high, still unsure. “Are you feeling better?”

I nodded. “Yeah, but I think I’m like you. If it came down to it, I’d kill someone to protect you.”

“And you know that doesn’t make you a bad person, right? A lot of people would do that. *Most* people would do that. It’s a natural instinct to protect those we love.” Flint tenderly fingered a lock of hair from my face. He leaned down and kissed me softly on the lips. It wasn’t a passionate kiss, more of a *I-just-want-to-know-you’re-still-here-and-that-I-still-love-you-and-that-you’re-really-okay* kind of kiss. The kind of kiss one experiences when the future holds so many unknowns.

I threaded a hand through his hair and cupped the back of his neck. A zing of desire raced through me.

Flint’s energy picked up too. I knew he felt my body respond. Pushing me back, he lay down on top of me and kissed me again. His energy picked up more, growing hot and heavy.

When I wrapped a leg around his waist, our energy exploded.

He pressed me deeper into the bed, his weight sinking us into the mattress. The kiss that had started as gentle and questioning, turned into one full of need.

“I could only ever love you,” he whispered. “And I’ll *always* love you, no matter what.” He kissed down the side of my neck, tenderly, achingly. Desire pooled in my core as his large palm cupped my breast. “I don’t know what I would do if I ever lost you.”

His words hit so close to home that I closed my eyes and let myself get carried away in our lovemaking.

It felt like hours before our breathing calmed and our bodies cooled. We lay in a tangle of sweaty limbs and damp sheets, both of us staring at one another. For a long time, neither of us said anything. Finally, Flint moved. He inched closer and kissed me softly on the neck. His heart beat strongly in his chest.

“I love you,” he whispered. “No matter what happens. No matter what you do.”

I placed a hand on his cheek, his stubble rough under my palm. “I love you too. Always have. Always will.”

WE DRESSED AND left our room in the early afternoon. Luckily, everyone else had also taken their time getting up. The late start to our day was kind of ironic considering we were still in San Francisco and Marcus was still hunting us. However, Father felt we were relatively safe since we'd taken so many precautions checking into the hotel. He also felt that Luke needed the rest.

Everyone was in Di and Jacinda's suite by the time we arrived. Luke had three trays of food in front of him. He was inhaling everything in sight.

Jet grinned when Flint closed the door behind us. Jet then waggled his eyebrows. It seemed everybody knew what we'd been doing whenever we were the last to show up.

A blush crept up my neck until my cheeks flushed. Yes, sex was a natural thing to do, but it was still embarrassing when everyone knew that's how you'd spent your morning.

"Nice of you to join us." Jasper grinned.

I almost retorted that he was one to talk. From Mica's mussed hair, it was obvious Flint and I hadn't been the only ones engaged in amorous activities.

I raised an eyebrow at Luke. "How are you feeling?"

The werewolf finished his last plate of food and winked at me. His back was propped against the headboard while his massive frame stretched out in front of him. Jacinda perched at his side, holding a glass with a straw up to him. Jacinda was nothing if not doting when someone was sick. I still remembered how she'd tried to dress me after my entanglement with Aaron. She gave hovering a whole new meaning.

However, Luke didn't seem to mind the attention. He obediently took the pills in Jacinda's outstretched hand and then sipped from the straw. When finished, he gave her a crooked grin. She simply fluffed the pillows behind his head and asked how he felt.

"Just fine, beautiful. You can be my nurse anytime."

She harrumphed but I still caught her smile when she stood to refill his water.

"I'll need to check your incision," Di said as everyone sat down.

Luke's eyebrows rose. "Now?"

"It seems as good a time as any."

Luke lifted his shirt. We all leaned forward. None of us had seen what his surgery had done.

Di stood over him and frowned as she leaned down. Touching around the incision, she pushed it a few times. From Luke's nonchalant expression, he didn't seem to mind.

"Amazing," she muttered.

Father joined her. Beside Di's all black attire, Father looked positively colorful. In pressed khaki trousers, a checked collared dress shirt sporting colors of reds, blues and greens, covered with a V-neck sweater in a beautiful hunter green, he looked like a picture straight out of a Ralph Lauren catalog.

Father's eyes widened. "You're almost healed." Both he and Di inspected the incision more closely.

My eyes widened when I saw the red line running across Luke's abdomen. It looked as if it had been healing for several weeks. It still wasn't a scar, so it wasn't completely healed, but it certainly didn't resemble a fresh incision.

Luke scratched his face. Several days' worth of stubble lined it. "I've always healed fast. Food helps."

"This fast?" Di asked incredulously.

Luke shrugged. "I guess so."

Di and Father eyed one another. "Does it have something to do with his lupine DNA?" she asked quietly.

"It could." Father frowned contemplatively. "Animal saliva is known to contain enzymes that promote healing. Wolves commonly lick wounds to better heal them, but I'm not sure about their blood work. He's all but bypassed the inflammatory stage of wound healing—"

"Perhaps anti-pathogenic properties or superior perfusion or an advanced cytokine response?" Di countered.

"It's possible. Perhaps a drug Marcus administered solicits that response."

Their heads dipped toward one another.

Jet rolled his eyes. "Aren't we supposed to be figuring out how to use the tracking device to catch one of Marcus' men?"

Father and Di shrugged sheepishly.

Luke pulled his shirt down and eyed them curiously. "So it won't take a month for this to heal?"

"Probably not," Di replied.

I knew Father and Di wanted to continue brainstorming the explanations for Luke's expedited healing. With regretful looks at one another, they seemed to know this wasn't the right time.

I smiled. It was hard not to. If O'Brien and Marcus didn't exist, Father and Di would probably spend all of their days happily locked away in a lab conducting research or doing experiments.

"Right." Di glanced at Jet. "We'll get to Marcus in a minute. As for you, Luke. I'd say you're at a stage we'd expect to see in someone three weeks out from surgery. I think it's safe to say within the next few days you'll be as good as healed."

He grunted. "I kind of figured as much. It's never taken me long to heal before."

I eyed Edgar and Susannah. Both still sat away from the group. "Do you also heal this quickly?"

Edgar nodded. "All three of us do."

I cocked my head. "So one of Marcus' drugs must cause expedited healing."

Di's focus stayed on Luke. "What other injuries have you healed from?"

"A number of nasty gashes, multiple incisions from experiments Marcus did on me, a broken leg when I was running one year—"

"Um, Di?" Jet tapped his watch.

The excited gleam in her eyes cooled. She cleared her throat. "Right, I'd like to hear more about this later, Luke, but Jet's right. We should be devising a plan right now for how to catch Marcus' men." She turned to Father. "All right, would you mind getting the tracking device?"

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Since Jacinda and Di had a suite, there was plenty of room for all of us as we moved into the living area. Neutral colored floral wallpaper covered the walls. A gas fireplace, vacant and cold, sat in between two windows. The furniture reminded me of something one would see in an ornate drawing room.

The rain continued outside. All it seemed to do during a San Francisco winter was rain.

Di stood by the fireplace, her tall form dark against the light colored décor. She clasped her hands behind her back and faced us. I vaguely felt as if we were in a board meeting, just like in the movies, although instead of a huge table and swiveling chairs, we sat on chaise lounges and wing backed chairs.

“We need to devise a plan to lure Marcus’ men to a specific area.” She paced in front of the fireplace a few times. “That area needs to be away from people so we won’t draw attention. From there, we’ll need to figure out how to transport those men to a new location for questioning.”

“Hold on.” Jasper held his hand up. “Before we get into that, what about the money? Did Father ever get that figured out?”

Father leaned forward. “It’s not entirely sorted out yet. I have a few people working on it, but for the time being, we’re fine. We should have enough funds to do whatever we need and by the end of the week, all of my money should be secure.”

Flint leaned back on the sofa. “Okay, so I guess we don’t need to discuss Conroy’s funds any further. Not at the moment, anyway.”

Di nodded briskly. “As I was saying, we need to do several things. One, find a location to lure the men. Two, devise a way to get the tracking devise there in a safe and believable manner. Three, formulate a plan to capture the men without them catching us. And four, transport them to an area where we can safely interrogate them.”

Jet snickered. “Well, when you put it like that, it should be a piece of cake.”

Ignoring him, Di continued to pace. From her heavy frown and stiff movements, she seemed more stressed than usual.

Father’s phone rang. He frowned. “I need to take this.” He stepped out of the room which left us to plan on our own.

“Is there a park or somewhere away from the city center that doesn’t see much foot traffic?” I suggested.

Di stopped pacing. “Father has been looking into that. We’ve narrowed it down to two areas, both in Marin County which is relatively close to here. Either Mount Tamalpais State Park or an old military base near Marin Headlands.”

“Okay.” Jasper crossed his arms and leaned against the wall. “So which one?”

Di pulled out her phone and passed it around. On the screen were maps of the area.

“The state park has excellent tree cover,” Di explained. “Redwoods, oaks and low lying shrub encompass most of the park. There are a number of canyons, however, which could make extracting the men harder.”

I studied the maps. “What are the roads like to get in and out of there?”

“Two lane mostly, and the roads are very curvy. We also won’t be able to jump on an interstate right away. It will take longer to evacuate.”

Flint’s brow furrowed. “What about the other place?”

Di’s dark hair brushed her chin when she turned to him. “The military base in the Headlands is close to the coast. It’s mostly low lying ground cover, but there are more roads so it’ll be easier to access them. *And* easier to get the men out.”

“That seems like the better option then,” Jacinda said.

Mica strummed her fingers. “But what about places to hide? It won’t be easy to hide in ground cover.”

“Are the military bases abandoned?” I asked.

Di nodded.

Jet cocked his head. “Are there enough places around those buildings to hide?”

“Hopefully,” Di replied.

We bounced thoughts and concerns back and forth. It was nice when we did this kind of stuff, everyone was included, not just Di and Flint.

I glanced at Luke, Edgar and Susannah halfway through it. All sat quietly. Luke's eyes had turned that golden color as he listened intently, and Edgar leaned forward in his seat, seemingly eager to hear what we decided. Susannah, however, sat on a chair pushed back from the group, her thin arms wrapped around her twig-like legs which were drawn to her chest. She stared out the window.

I sighed. I didn't know if Susannah would ever fully return to the world around her. For the most part, she seemed lost in a land inside her mind that only she could visit.

"So it's decided that we'll use the military base?" Di still stood. She hadn't sat once during our discussion.

Everyone agreed.

Di put the maps away. "We need to scout that place out. Before we remove the tracking device from the transport box."

Amber perked up. "Speaking of the tracking device, how are we going to get it there without them finding us first?"

"That brings us to the second part of our plan which will be the trickiest." Di paced the room twice before continuing. "We need them to see the device moving. If we simply remove it at the base, and it suddenly appears in a secluded location, they may sense a trap."

"They may sense a trap regardless," Jet said dryly. "It's been a full day now where the device hasn't been picked up. Won't they think that's unusual?"

The door opened and Father slipped back inside.

I smiled at him before shifting in my seat. "Maybe they think Luke's hiding underground right now. That's believable, right?"

Flint glanced at Luke. "How much do you know about the device they put in you?"

Luke shrugged his massive shoulders. "I know the device is how they tracked me in the wild. I also know they always made me transform into a wolf *before* they released me, but it didn't occur to me until the other day, when those men surrounded the house, that the actual transformation could trigger it."

He lounged on the cream colored sofa, giving no indication his incision bothered him. I wondered how much it had healed in the last hour.

I cocked my head. "Does the device stop working when you transform back to human?"

“No. Otherwise, they would have released me in the wild, and I could have turned back to a human and escaped. I actually tried that a few times. They could still always find me.”

I paused. “But it’s triggered by you transforming to your wolf form? I don’t get it. That doesn’t make any sense.”

Luke scratched his jaw, the sound audible as he rubbed his large fingers over stubble. “I’m pretty sure once it’s activated the only way to turn it off is by someone manually turning it off.”

“Like with some switch?” Mica asked.

Luke nodded. “It was controlled by a remote, from what I could gather. But they had to be in close proximity to me for it to work.”

“So your device automatically turns on when you transform into a wolf,” I summarized, “but the only way to turn it *off* is to have their remote somewhat close to you, and to manually turn it off.”

Luke shrugged. “I believe that’s how it works.”

“Which would explain why they couldn’t activate it when we took you from Chicago. They weren’t close enough to turn on your tracking device.” Di placed her hands on her hips. “They were probably biding their time since they knew you would transform sooner or later.”

I inched closer to where Edgar and Susannah sat. “Neither of you must have tracking devices? If you did, Susannah’s would have been triggered days ago.”

Edgar nodded. “That’s right. Neither of us do. Only Luke was let loose.”

Susannah didn’t seem aware that we were speaking about her. Her gaze stayed on the window.

Flint’s brow furrowed. “Why not just leave the tracking device on all of the time?”

Father cleared his throat. “The satellite signal wouldn’t have been able to penetrate that far underground. Having his tracking device on continuously would have served no purpose. It only would drain the battery, meaning they’d have to replace it sooner.”

“But in a way, it was a flaw in the system,” Flint countered. “If they had Luke’s GPS activated twenty-four hours a day and *never* turned it off, they could have found us right away, as soon as we were above ground in Chicago in fact.”

I shuddered. I didn't think any of us considered that our three newcomers could have tracking devices implanted in their bodies when we rescued them.

"I bet Marcus is kicking himself right now." Jet grinned, seemingly not bothered that it was only luck that had kept us from getting caught earlier.

A curious glint grew in Di's eyes. "How old were you when they put it in you?"

Luke frowned. "I don't know. I have no idea how old I am."

Father clasped his hands. "You'd be around twenty-four now."

"I'm twenty-four?" Luke's voice grew quiet.

The room was silent for a moment. An emotion covered Luke's face that looked very close to shock. He wasn't the only one processing what we'd just learned. A notable spike in everyone's energy fields registered in me, mine included. Luke had gone his entire life without knowing his age.

Anger flashed through me. Couldn't Marcus share that simple information? What did withholding that possibly gain?

"Do you know how old I am?" Edgar asked eagerly.

"You're twenty-two."

Edgar's expression looked very similar to Luke's. Amber placed her hand over Edgar's. He gripped it tightly.

"And Susannah?" I asked quietly. "How old is she?"

Susannah neither tensed nor gave any indication she'd heard me say her name. Her long, dark hair hung around her face, like a veil shrouding her from others. Not once had she glanced at any of us.

"Susannah's twenty-one. The same age as you, Galena."

Another moment of silence passed before Di resumed her pacing.

I sank back against Flint. He placed his arm around my shoulders and squeezed. His energy picked up even more when Luke mentioned it was pure luck his tracking device hadn't been active twenty-four hours a day. If it had, it was very possible all eleven of us would be locked away right now in some secret O'Brien facility.

I shuddered at the thought and hoped our luck held out.

WE CONTINUED WORKING out details well into the evening. It was decided Jacinda, Amber and Mica would watch for any hikers or cars traveling through the Headlands. With their abilities to hear, smell and see for miles, there wasn't a chance of anyone sneaking through. If they *did*

find someone wandering near the area who wasn't one of Marcus' men, they'd alert the twins. The twins would then send out emotions to those people of fear and stress. Hopefully, that would be enough of a deterrent that the hikers would turn around.

Jacinda, Amber and Mica would also work together to alert us when Marcus' men *did* arrive. The plan was for all of us to be in place around the military base before we activated the tracking device. Activating the device would be Di's job.

As for me, Flint and the twins, we'd work similarly to how we had when the men surrounded us in Arizona. Di would concentrate on sensing any danger, the twins and I would placate and hold the men while Flint bound and gagged them. It seemed like a well thought out plan, but there was one potential danger.

If Marcus knew how we had functioned the other night when the ten men surrounded us, we could be in trouble. He could anticipate our moves. It was scary enough that he already knew what I was capable of, from my stunt at the warehouse when I blasted him through the door.

Our vulnerabilities didn't sit well with me. If the twins and I were incapacitated in any way, our plan fell apart. That kind of weakness was daunting. All we could do was hope that Marcus still didn't know what all of us were fully capable of.

I thought of those men we'd left bound and gagged outside the Arizona home. *Have they guessed what our abilities are?*

None of us felt it was a good idea to travel to the Headlands to scout out the area until nighttime. We had no idea where Marcus' men were or what they were doing, but we did know there was less of a chance of us being spotted at night.

It was also decided that the eight of us would once again be involved in capturing the men while Edgar, Luke and Susannah stayed at the hotel.

Luke growled as soon as that decision was made. "Need I repeat that I'm the strongest one here?"

A dozen pizza boxes sat around us. We'd ordered delivery earlier. Luke ripped off another piece. He ate half a slice in one bite. Alone, he'd eaten five pizzas. He hadn't been kidding about needing food to heal quickly.

"And need I remind you, that you had surgery yesterday morning and shouldn't be running after men or possibly getting into fights?" Di said

coolly.

“I’m completely healed,” Luke snarled.

“Healing well, yes, completely healed, no.” From Di’s tone, I knew there was no point arguing.

Luke, however, didn’t. He kept coming back with reasons for why he should be allowed to join us, at which Di had a quick, logical response for why he shouldn’t.

At least Edgar was amenable to our plan. He was happy to stay at the hotel to keep an eye on Susannah.

I eventually stopped listening and walked to the window. The rain had stopped. The dark night sky was inky black, but lights from the streets below glowed like an oasis. Clouds still blanketed the sky but the forecast remained dry. At least when we went to the Headlands tonight we wouldn’t be tramping in freezing rain.

Flint appeared behind me, his reflection in the window. He put his arms around my waist and leaned down, planting a soft kiss on my neck before pulling me gently against him. His energy pulsed steadily.

“What’s wrong?”

I felt him shrug. When he didn’t respond, I turned and looked up. His broad shoulders blocked everyone else from view. It felt as though it was just me and him. “Tell me.”

A dark expression covered his face. “I hate the thought of you getting in another fight against O’Brien.”

“That again?” I teased. I gathered the energy from everyone in the room. It formed readily into a ball. It was so easy for me now that it was hard to believe only two months ago, I had next to no control over it. I gently pushed the ball against his hip.

He jumped when it hit him.

“I think I can take care of myself.” I smiled and let the ball dissipate.

He chuckled and pulled me back to him. “I know, but I still hate it. Just give me that much, okay?”

I sighed. I knew if it were up to Flint, I’d never leave the safety of a locked and secured room. Probably a padded room too, just in case I tripped, or heaven forbid, got a scrape on my knee or some equally horrendous injury.

“Flint, you really don’t need to worry about me.”

He raised an eyebrow, the chestnut line arched over his dark eye. “You know you’re wasting your breath when you say things like that.”

I shrugged. “I don’t want you to get distracted by me. I’m one of the strongest in our group.”

“I know.”

“Then stop worrying.” I gave him a quick hug before turning. Di and Luke had finally stopped arguing which only meant one thing.

The time had come for us to go.

CHAPTER TWELVE

The eight of us piled into two cars. The other three and Father stayed at the hotel. Father wanted to come with us, but once again, we refused. We'd decided weeks ago that Father must stay safe. No matter what. We relied too heavily on Father's outside contacts, that only he could summon, and his knowledge of O'Brien. Without Father, we'd be at a severe disadvantage. And even though we were only casing out the area tonight, it was still safer to leave Father at the hotel with the tracking device tucked safely in the lead box.

Staying behind would also give him an opportunity to talk to Susannah, Luke and Edgar. With any luck, Father would be able to get through to Susannah a little more.

It was just after ten at night when we pulled out of the hotel's parking garage. The streets were still rain soaked, but despite the heavy cloud cover hanging overhead, the windshield stayed dry. For once, it wasn't raining. It was a nice reprieve.

Mica's enhanced eyesight was put to work. Di asked her to continually scan the area for any suspicious activity. It wasn't an easy task. After all, we had no idea what we were looking for.

Vehicles crammed the streets. Pedestrians filled the sidewalks. I cracked the window, and a hint of humid air swirled in. The temperature couldn't be above fifty.

I'd seen a lot in my four months of hitchhiking, yet I still found new cities fascinating. With Christmas looming, holiday decorations hung everywhere. The buildings were different too. They were narrow and crowded together. It all felt charming, as if the city had stepped out of the nineteenth century, its historic past seemingly preserved in the static neighborhoods.

Driving in the city, however, *wasn't* charming. It was terrifying. By the time we got out of the city and onto highway 101, I'd added at least two dozen snarls to my hair. My fingers worked in them constantly as Flint and

Di drove on the manic, crowded roads. Cars constantly swerved or cut others off.

A twinge of nostalgia filled me for the quiet county road that we'd driven from Pete and Val's into Little Raven. The only dangers one encountered there were either ruts in the road or a dashing squirrel.

Crossing the Golden Gate Bridge, though, made the numerous snarls worth it. Fog swirled around the top of the large, orange suspension bridge. Between the ocean crashing in waves a hundred feet below and the distant view of Alcatraz, a little shiver ran through me. When I was a child, I'd dreamed of seeing the world. In the past eight months, I'd seen more than I'd previously experienced in twenty years.

After we got off the bridge, we drove west to Marin Headlands. I spent most of the drive watching the ocean as we snaked through the roads in the foothills. But as much as I loved the scenery, despite the darkness, it didn't stop my growing sense of dread as the military base grew closer. The more I saw of the landscape, the more I realized Mica was right. There weren't many places to hide. Most of the hills were covered with low lying brush and ground cover.

When we reached the military base, Di parked on the side of the road ahead of us. Flint pulled up behind her. In the dark, the military base wasn't visible. When the engine turned off, silence filled our cab.

"So this is it?" Jacinda craned her head to look up the hill.

We stepped out of the Volvo and joined the others. The only sounds were our car doors slamming. Lights from the city hovered to the east. Scents from the sea carried in a strong breeze. My hair whipped around me. I pulled out an elastic band and twirled it into a bun.

For a moment, I relished the touch of the air on my skin. However, it reminded me that I still needed a jacket. I was lucky we were only scoping the area out tonight. I made a mental note to buy one in the morning. If nothing else, shivering could distract me. Even though we'd had plenty of experience laying low in the cold while staking out the warehouse in Chicago a few weeks ago, I didn't want to take that chance here. My ability to stop people or throw them if necessary could mean the difference between catching one of Marcus' men or being caught by them. I needed to be able to create energy balls reliably.

"Where do we go?" Jet asked.

Di nodded. "Up this hill."

Walking in a single file line, we climbed a path to the top. Di and Father had been right. The road would be easily accessible from here. That would hopefully work to our advantage when we wanted to escape.

Once we reached the buildings, it was hard to make out the details in the night. What I did see were graffiti covered walls on numerous concrete structures. Doors were missing on most of the entrances, and almost all of the windows were broken. What appeared to be large puddles of water, even ponds, glittered in the moonlight that filtered through the heavy cloud cover. The base seemed to be a collection of box-like structures, a few stairs and railings connecting them. Most weren't taller than a single story.

Mica stuffed her hands in her pockets. "Is this where we're going to lure them?"

Jasper scoped out the area. "So where should we hide?"

Di put her hands on her hips. "We'll have Flint scout the area and then we'll decide."

Before she'd finished her sentence, Flint took off. His movements were a blur as he raced around the structures and surrounding hills.

When Flint returned, he was barely winded. "Our weak point will be a valley down the other side. If they escape through there, it'll be hard to stop them, too many areas of thick brush. There are a few hills that would be good to have Jacinda, Amber and Mica stationed at. It'll give them the best lookout spots as they'll be able to see a full three-sixty." Flint paused. "As for the rest of us, we want to stay high and away from the road. They'll most likely drive a good portion of the distance before getting out and trying to sneak up on us."

"What if they come from behind?" I asked.

"Not likely. Unless they want to walk through miles of hills and brush."

"Okay, so where do we all go?" Jacinda's energy grew more nervous.

We spent the next few hours thoroughly combing the area until we all felt comfortable with the building layouts. It didn't sit well with me that we only had one day to plan, but the longer we kept the tracking device in the lead box, the sooner Marcus would sense a trap.

THE NEXT MORNING, Luke's incision looked even better. I peered over Di's shoulder as she assessed it. It was now a thin, pink scar.

"Can I join in the fun now?" Luke's golden eyes flickered.

Di pulled his shirt back down. He lay on their bed, much like he had yesterday. All of us were again in the suite. Breakfast scents hung in the air. Two empty trays from room service sat beside him. Luke's golden eyes followed Di's movements.

She went to the sink and washed her hands. "You still need to stay here."

Luke leaped from the bed, causing Jacinda to gasp. Di merely cocked an eyebrow.

"You need me," he growled. "They'll be looking for me. Why not give them what they want? I'm the best way to lure them."

Nobody said a word. I expected Di to say that Luke wasn't coming and he needed to stay put. Instead, she crossed her arms. "How do you propose doing that?"

Luke's eyes lit up. Di had to look up to meet his gaze.

"Give me the tracking device. I'll take it to the edge of the city and remove it from the box so they pick up the signal. From there, I'll go straight to the Headlands. You'll all be there waiting. I'll lead them right to you."

"And what if you get caught on the way?" Di asked.

"I won't."

"How is this better from what we'd originally planned?" Di countered.

"They're expecting the tracking device to be *in* me. If they see you with it, they'll know we're up to something, but if they see *me* and only me, they'll probably believe you all fled and left me on my own."

"He has a point." Jasper stood at the entrance to the living area. Subtle facial expressions flitted across the twins' faces.

Di eyed Luke skeptically. "But you don't know where the Headlands are or where we'll be. You weren't with us last night when we planned everything."

"I'm a quick learner. Fill me in and tell me your plan. I won't let you down."

Di and Flint shared a silent exchange. Jacinda watched anxiously from the chair she perched on, while Amber and Edgar glanced between everyone, wide eyed. As usual, only Susannah seemed unaffected. She sat by herself in the living area, staring into the cold, empty fireplace.

Di sighed. "Okay, but we're doing a practice run today. I don't want anyone else leaving the hotel except for me and Luke. If it goes well, we'll

go with this plan tonight.”

A slow, satisfied smile spread across the werewolf’s face.

DI AND LUKE left shortly after. The rest of us were supposed to stay put until they returned. However, I still didn’t have a jacket. It seemed trivial, but if we were stuck out there tonight in the cold with rain pouring around us, I’d be soaked and freezing in no time.

I approached Father. He sat at the desk in the living area, doing something on his laptop. He looked lost in concentration. I had to call his name several times before he looked up.

“Oh, Galena. I didn’t see you there.”

“Do you think it had be okay if I left to buy a jacket? I forgot mine in Arizona.”

He sighed and rubbed his eyes. I recognized the telltale frustration. I was always losing things or forgetting something. Father had dealt with this my entire childhood and adolescence.

When he finally opened his eyes, he said, “Doesn’t somebody have one you could wear?”

I shook my head. “Mica only brought one, and while Jacinda brought plenty of clothes, she didn’t bring much for outerwear.”

He sighed again. “Okay, take Flint with you, and both of you keep your hats and sunglasses on.”

I paused. “Do you really think Marcus has access to security cameras?”

“I don’t know. Probably not, but I’m not taking any chances.”

I kissed his cheek. His round cheeks lifted when he smiled, and the minty and soapy smell I associated with him wafted up to greet me.

“We’ll be careful.”

“Bring Flint with you.” Father gave me a stern look.

“Okay, okay.”

He gave my hand a squeeze before turning back to his computer. I turned around swiftly, the movement causing my curls to swish around my arms. I stopped short when my gaze met Susannah’s. She sat on the couch, staring at me.

I tentatively smiled at her. She didn’t return it, but she didn’t look away either. Slowly, I approached the couch. When she didn’t tense or move back, I sat beside her.

She drew her knees up and wrapped her arms around them. Her gaze glued to something on the floor. Dark circles lined her eyes.

"Do you need anything at the store?"

She didn't reply.

I frowned as I realized Susannah wore the same baggy sweatpants and shirt she always wore. A few stains soiled the shirt, and the pant hems were darkened with dirt. I wondered if she'd ever washed them. I frowned further. Did she even know *how* to wash them?

A flash of guilt ran through me that I hadn't paid more attention. When Luke, Susannah and Edgar joined us, Father had bought all of them clothes, toiletry items, books and whatever else they'd requested. Luke and Edgar seemed to change their clothes every day, sometimes every other day, and neither had known how to use a washing machine, but both had asked to be taught. I smiled, remembering how fascinated Edgar had been as he bent down, watching the front loader wash and soak his clothes. He'd even volunteered to wash everyone's clothes those first few days.

But Susannah had shown little to no interest in anything. The only time she'd ever appeared happy was when she sat perched on the deck railing back in Arizona. Since we'd left, she'd barely said a word.

I glanced over my shoulder to find Father watching us sadly. I knew he was as worried about Susannah as me.

FLINT AND I stepped out of the hotel with sunglasses and hats in place. I grinned when the fresh air filled my nose. Energy from the bustling pedestrians swirled in the air. This was one thing I liked about cities. The people. I loved meeting new people and talking to others, but while that wasn't possible now, it was invigorating to simply be around so many.

I could tell Flint felt the complete opposite. He gracefully side stepped some guy who almost bumped into him. The guy's nose was buried in his cell phone, seemingly oblivious to those around him as he walked down the sidewalk. Flint muttered something under his breath and pulled me close to his side, maneuvering us down the street through the steady flow of pedestrians.

I knew I was supposed to be worried about Marcus, or thinking about tonight, but all I could do was smile and wrap my arm around Flint's waist. The sky was cloudy and rain once again threatened to fall, but my smile grew even wider.

When had we *ever* been able to do this? How often had we talked about living in the real world? About doing everyday normal things that everyone else took for granted? This was the first time we'd ever strolled down a busy city street together.

"What are you smiling about?" he asked.

"This. Us."

He squeezed my shoulders.

"We've always talked about doing normal stuff like this but never have."

"Yeah . . . it was a common theme in our daydreams."

I grinned. "This is what normal couples do. Are you hungry?"

He inched his head downward and pulled his sunglasses off just enough for me to see his questioning gaze. Between his dark eyes and masculine hands, he looked sexy as hell. A tingle of desire raced through me.

"I thought we were buying a jacket," he said.

"We are, but we still haven't had lunch and it's after noon. Maybe we could get something to eat."

His mouth tightened.

A brief surge of disappointment flowed through me. There was a reason Father had wanted Flint to accompany me, and it had nothing to do with the fact that we were together.

"I'm not sure that's such a good idea."

I nodded. "Yeah, of course. We should buy the jacket and get back." I bit my lip. At least the cut on it had healed. It didn't sting anymore.

I started looking for a shop that sold outerwear when I was pulled to the left. I stopped short.

Glass windows revealed dining tables and chairs within. All of the tables were covered with white linen tablecloths. Wine glasses and pressed cloth napkins sat beside each one.

I raised an eyebrow at Flint.

He pulled open the door and grinned. "You only live once, right?"

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The restaurant was French. I'd never had French food. Scents of freshly baked bread and herbs flowed through the air. A few other diners sat at tables, scrumptious looking bowls of soup and baked dishes in front of them.

I switched my vision. Everyone in the restaurant had normal clouds. Any anxiety I had melted away as I switched my vision back to normal.

The hostess greeted us warmly and showed us to our table. It was in the back, away from the window. Flint nodded in approval at the dim corner.

Our chairs squeaked on the floor when we pulled them back. A candle glowed in the middle of the table, its flame flickering in a slight draft. It was oddly romantic.

A brief sense of nervousness gnawed at me when we sat. Flint and I had never been on a date like this before. We'd gone to restaurants with the group, but never to one this cozy and certainly not just the two of us.

"This is nice," I said tentatively.

Flint removed his sunglasses and hat.

My eyes widened.

He nodded toward the ceiling. "The first thing I checked when we entered was whether or not they had security cameras. There's one by the front door and one behind the register, but that's it. We're too far away to be in either's view."

Smiling, I took off my cap and threaded my fingers through my curls. They hung around me in messy rivulets. Flint reached across the table and brushed one behind my ear.

"I love your hair."

A blush stained my cheeks. For some reason, I felt as if we were back at the cabin about to share our first kiss. Nerves exploded in me like fireworks on the Fourth of July. I took a deep breath and tried not to stare at how strong Flint's hands looked clasped together, or the way the light

glinted off his square jaw, dipping his face into shadows. His dark eyes, flecked with gold regarded me steadily. When he looked at me like that, I became a waterfall of warm honey, ready to coat myself right over him.

Our waitress appeared and broke the spell. She smiled politely and held out the wine list. Luckily, Flint wasn't a mess of hormones. He picked out a twenty-year-old Bordeaux which the waitress readily supplied. When she finally left, I sipped my wine and picked up the menu. Flint did the same, but he traced a finger along my forearm while reading his.

It was almost as though he didn't know he was doing it. I tried to concentrate on the feel of the menu. It was a single piece of paper delicately tied to a wood board. The wood felt smooth and firm under my grip, but no matter how hard I tried, Flint's fingers demanded my attention. Shivers ran through me that had nothing to do with the draft flickering the candle.

I cleared my throat, trying to dispel my heady desire. "What should we get?"

Flint smiled. "Whatever you want. Who knows when we'll be able to do this again."

Consequently, when the waitress returned, we ordered creamed lobster bisque and clams baked with tomato, white wine and garlic sauce served over a toasted baguette. Following that, we shared meals of beef tenderloin and frog legs sautéed in garlic and butter with a side of creamed spinach. For dessert, we gorged on crème brulée and a warm apple tart with a hefty scoop of vanilla ice cream.

It was all incredibly delicious, even the frog legs which not surprisingly, tasted like chicken. By the time we finished, I was so full I could barely move.

I'd also completely forgotten we were supposed to be shopping for a jacket. The looks Flint gave me throughout the meal made me want to return to the hotel and wrap myself around him. Both of our hats and sunglasses sat forgotten beside us. We'd laughed and talked throughout the entire meal. I couldn't remember the last time we'd been able to relax and enjoy each other like this. It had easily been weeks if not months.

When the bill arrived, we paid with cash, put our glasses and hats back on and walked out the door. I shivered when the cool air hit me. This time it had nothing to do with desire. It was ridiculously cold compared to the cozy restaurant.

A buzz sounded and Flint reached into his pocket. He scowled at the screen. “Conroy’s wondering where we are.” He typed a few letters in a text before putting it back in his pocket.

Guilt made me pause. We’d been gone much longer than necessary. “What’d you say?”

“That we were fine and would be back shortly.” He looped his arm around my shoulders and pulled me into a walk.

“Should we go back?”

“No, you still need a jacket.”

I did, but if Father was worried, there may be a reason. “Did he say anything else?”

Flint stopped and turned toward me. Someone grumbled and pushed past us. We’d stopped in the middle of the sidewalk.

“I don’t want you to worry, babe. Conroy’s fine and so is everyone else. We’ve taken all of the necessary precautions to avoid detection on the *off* chance Marcus’ men are around here. They most likely have no idea where we are, so I don’t want you thinking about it.”

I smiled. “Okay.”

Within minutes, that safe feeling that always swam through me in Flint’s presence worked its magic. We spent the next hour meandering into stores, trying things on, looking at various items, and basically acting like tourists. It was completely refreshing and a much needed stress reliever.

On the way back, we picked up coffees at a café. I sipped a caramel latte while Flint drank a peppermint mocha. By the time we returned to the hotel, it was late afternoon and the sun was going down. We walked past the lobby. Our shopping bags brushed against our legs as we stepped into the elevator. An elated high coursed through me. It was easily the best afternoon I could remember in a very long time.

“Jacinda’s going to be so jealous. She’s going to drool with envy when I tell her we spent the afternoon dining and shopping.”

Flint chuckled. “I saw her eyeing the stores this morning when she looked out the window.”

“Good thing Father never gave her a credit card.”

We were both laughing when we walked into Di and Jacinda’s suite. My laughter died when I spotted Di. She paced the room, her manic movements back. When the door closed loudly behind us, she spun in our direction, her dark eyes glittering.

“Where were you both?” she hissed.

I took a step back, but Flint calmly dropped our shopping bags. “We bought Lena a jacket. She didn’t have one.”

“And that took you *four* hours?” Di seethed. “Have you both forgotten why we’re here and what we’re doing tonight?”

“On the contrary, I was very aware of that.” Flint’s voice grew deadly quiet. A glint shone in his eyes.

They held eye contact for a few more moments. Their energy practically crackled in the air.

Di finally took a deep breath and crossed her arms. Her shoulders relaxed. “You stayed safe?”

“Yes.”

She nodded curtly.

The rest of the group sat in the living room, except for Father and Susannah. I didn’t see them anywhere.

“What’d you buy?” Jacinda’s eyes sparkled as she assessed the bags. She sat beside Luke on the couch. A movie played on the large TV screen hanging on the wall. A romantic comedy from the looks of it.

I pulled out our purchases. “Not too much.” I showed her the Gore-Tex jacket I’d picked out and then pulled out gloves and hats for everyone. I handed them around. “Just in case it’s cold tonight. I wasn’t sure how much everyone packed.”

Jet and Jasper grinned. “Thanks, Lena.”

Both of the dark haired, blue eyed twins stuffed their hair under the wool hats. All of the accessories were identical in color, either dark gray or black. They’d been practical picks since they wouldn’t be easily seen at night.

Edgar and Luke also mumbled a thank you. Both looked surprised that they’d been included. “I know you’re not coming with us, Edgar, but that doesn’t mean you couldn’t use this,” I explained.

Edgar put the hat on his shaved head. “Ta, love. Me loaf of bread ‘ill be much warmer with it.” He left it on and turned his attention back to the movie.

Amber giggled.

Mica’s eyes brightened. “Anything for me in there?”

I threw her matching gloves and a hat. There were only a few things left in the bag. I scanned the room. “Where’s Susannah?”

“She went back to her room,” Jet said.

“Alone?” I didn’t think any of us trusted Susannah to not bolt.

Jacinda shook her head. “Father’s with her.”

I got the room key from Edgar. He barely looked up when I asked. Surprisingly, everyone seemed engrossed in the movie. Normally, rom-coms were not popular in our group, but from the enchanted way Edgar and Luke watched it, I wondered how many movies they’d actually seen.

I left the hotel suite and walked down a flight of stairs to the room Edgar and Susannah shared. Without knocking, I inserted the key. What I saw when I walked into the room made me stop mid-stride.

Susannah and Father sat on the two beds, facing each other. Susannah’s eyes were closed. She looked to be deep in concentration, but what drew my attention wasn’t her tight expression, it was the feathers sprouted on the backs of her forearms. Deadly looking talons had grown on her bare feet and hands.

I gasped.

“Galena!” Father exclaimed.

Susannah’s eyes flashed open. They were eagle eyes, pale yellow and huge. She let out a scream, making me wince. Father hurriedly said something to her, his voice so low and soft I couldn’t hear.

Susannah seemed to calm. I watched, amazed, as her talons slowly disappeared, drawing back into her fingers before her nails once again looked human.

It was one thing that perplexed me about Susannah’s change. When she was fully transformed, her hands were the tips of her wings, but when she was mid-change, they were talons, just like her feet. I had no idea why that was.

“Sorry,” I mumbled, backing up. “I should have knocked. I didn’t mean to interrupt.”

“It’s all right, Galena. Come in and join us. I was just helping Susannah control her transformations better.”

Susannah blinked a few times. The pale yellow irises disappeared and were replaced with human blue. She shook her head, as if not sure of her surroundings. Father murmured a few more quiet words. Her tensed shoulders relaxed even more.

I approached the bed hesitantly. “Um, hi, Susannah.”

She eyed me warily.

I set the bag down. “I bought you something.”

She crossed her arms around her middle and kept her gaze on the floor. Father leaned forward and said something else. I didn’t hear all of it, but I did catch my name a few times.

As before, Susannah visibly relaxed under Father’s gentle tone.

A part of me wondered if Susannah remembered Father from when he’d worked at O’Brien fifteen years ago. For the most part, each group that was experimented on worked solely with their researcher. Father had been ours while Susannah, Luke and Edgar’s had been Marcus. However, a few times, Marcus had done experiments with our group and Father had done things with theirs. Perhaps Susannah had some distant memory of Father, from before she’d been studied and drugged so maliciously. It would explain why she seemed so trusting of him.

“Do you want to see it?”

She merely stared at me with her bright cobalt eyes, but she didn’t look away. I took that as a good sign.

I reached into the bag and pulled out a royal blue, cowl neck sweater. The tags dangled from it. It was cashmere which meant Jacinda would approve. I also withdrew a few pairs of black leggings. I handed everything to her.

“I thought you may like these.”

Her gaze darted to Father. He nodded encouragingly. It didn’t escape my attention that she still wore the same dirty top and sweatpants from yesterday. Susannah tentatively took the clothes. Our fingers touched briefly during the exchange, making her jump.

“Do you want to try it on?” I asked.

Susannah fingered the material. Her midnight hair was loose and tumbled down her back in thick oily waves. Snarls streaked through it.

“Susannah?” Father’s voice grew softer. “Would you like to go to the bathroom and change?”

Susannah abruptly stood. The movement was so fast, I stepped back in surprise.

She bolted past me and locked herself in the bathroom. I sat down on the bed with a sigh. “How’s she doing?”

Father cocked his head, looking thoughtful. “She’s doing better. Although, she’s a long way from feeling comfortable around people. I’m afraid it won’t be quick, but she’s made some progress. She’s so in tune

with her eagle that she resorts back to animalistic tendencies when she's stressed or scared. We've been working on her gaining better control over her animal this afternoon. I'm hoping that control will foster her self-esteem, inevitably building her confidence."

"So you think it's possible she'll be able to live in the real world someday?"

"That's my hope. It will most likely take months, if not years, before she acts like a normal human, but I don't think that's an unrealistic goal."

I was about to ask something else when the bathroom door opened. Susannah emerged. Once again, her head bowed downward, but her shoulders were pulled back and she didn't shrink in on herself like she usually did. When she reached Father's side, she looked at him questioningly, ignoring me completely.

"Do you like the new clothes?" he asked.

Susannah nodded.

"They look nice on you," I said. The sweater fell mid-thigh and the black leggings seemed to be the right length.

Susannah didn't reply.

Father took her hand gently. I was surprised that she neither jumped nor pulled back. "It's customary to thank someone when a person buys you something. If you'd like to thank Galena, you should turn to her, look her in the eye and say *thank you*. It's up to you if you'd like to do that or not, but those are interactions you'll commonly see outside."

Susannah darted a hesitant look at me. Her eyes matched the sweater perfectly.

I smiled encouragingly and looked as friendly as I could. It seemed to help because Susannah actually held eye contact for a few seconds and then smiled shyly.

"Thank you." Her voice was soft and quiet. It still amazed me that she could have such a quiet speaking voice while her eagle screams sounded as if they could break glass.

"You're welcome."

She held eye contact for a few more seconds before she sat on the bed beside Father.

I stood to leave. "I'll let you finish." As I moved toward the door, I added, "See you later tonight, Susannah."

She didn’t reply, but she watched me. I smiled brightly before walking out the door.

A buzz grew inside me. It was the familiar buzz that I always got when talking to people, except this time it was different. It was more meaningful, as if the short interaction Susannah and I shared was actually the beginning of something important.

Grinning, I walked up the stairs to join the others. However, as each step passed beneath me, my smile died as I remembered what tonight would bring.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Just after nine at night, Di nodded curtly. “Right. Let’s get a move on.”

The plan was for Luke to wait in the hotel. Once all of us were in place at the Headlands, he’d leave. Luke’s job was to remove the tracking device only when he was near the city’s edge. It seemed that he took his responsibility very seriously. His large, thick fingers gripped the box as if his life depended on it.

The rest of us donned our black gear and communication equipment. Energy strummed through the suite. It was somber and threaded with anxiety.

Once everyone was dressed, we looked like stagehands moving props during intermission. Since we needed to blend in with the public on the walk to the parking garage, we all threw colorful shirts and sweatshirts over our tops and stowed our ski masks and outerwear in a few bags.

Di pulled her backpack on. “We’ll call you when we’re in position at the military base, Luke. That’s when you leave. When you get to the edge of the city, beside that underground facility we found, take the tracking device out. You’ll need to move fast and get to the Headlands as quickly as possible.”

“In other words,” Jet said. “Don’t get caught.”

Di ignored Jet’s comment. “Since we don’t know where Marcus’ men are, it could take hours before they show up, but if they’re still in the city they’ll probably be at the Headlands within an hour.”

Jacinda gripped Luke’s arm. She bit her lip, her face a mask of worry.

Luke smiled, a glint in his golden eyes. “I’ll get there. You can count on that.”

One by one, Flint, Jacinda, Amber and I filed out of the room. It felt like déjà vu. We’d done something very similar to this only weeks ago. How was it that once again, we were in danger of being caught and potentially held as prisoners for the rest of our lives?

I understood now why Father had chosen hiding. Indefinite hiding did not make for a fulfilling life, in the sense that we could never truly live how we wanted, but we *had* been safe. I hadn't truly appreciated how precious that sanctity was.

"Are you okay?" Flint asked me quietly.

"I'm fine. You?"

"I'll be better when this is over with."

"How's your shoulder?" His wound this morning had been pale pink, no longer beefy red.

He strode by my side. "Almost completely healed."

We'd split up from Amber and Jacinda as soon as we exited the room. We'd take the stairs. They'd take the elevator. Mica, Di and the twins were still in the room. They'd wait a few minutes before venturing to the garage. We didn't want to all be seen exiting the hotel at once.

A man stepped out of a hotel room. He turned to make sure his door closed. I switched my vision and let out a sigh of relief when his cloud billowed white.

"Are you worried?" I asked when we sauntered past the man.

"How could I not be?"

Flint's tone and expression told me exactly what he meant. Neither of us wanted a life on the run. We wanted to be free to do as we pleased like normal people. This afternoon had been a novelty when we'd had lunch out, walked together on a city street and gone shopping. But the bottom line was that it *shouldn't* be. Those were things most people did every day, never once thinking anything of it, and that's what life was supposed to be. Not this. Not the life we were living filled with secrets, fear and worry.

"This will be over someday," I said. "Someday we'll finally get to live how we want."

"Let's hope so."

Our footsteps echoed in the stairwell as we jogged down flight after flight. When we reached the garage, we slid into the Volvo. Jacinda and Amber were already in the backseat. Flint started the car without saying a word.

We pulled onto the street. Lights from the hotel, shops and restaurants lit up the dark road. I gazed longingly at the people who walked along.

They were free.

They probably had no idea how lucky they were.

WE ARRIVED AT the Headlands forty-five minutes later. Di, the twins and Mica showed up fifteen minutes after that. They passed us from where we waited, parked on the road.

We'd arranged to park the cars in separate locations, a mile away from the military base. If we were able to capture some of the men, Father would arrive with a van. We'd load the men in that. After that, we'd retreat to our vehicles and bolt to the airport, once again escaping via Father's private jet. Who knew where we'd go.

I wondered what Greg would think when we showed up at the airport, for the second time in a month, with unconscious individuals that we had to carry onto the plane.

Cold, ocean air whipped around us when we stepped out of the car. Faint scents of salt traveled in it. The four of us walked quietly into the hills, our black garments blending into the night.

"Put your ski mask on," Flint told Amber.

She hastily donned it over her short dark hair. Jacinda, Flint and I already had ours on. The only thing I could see were their eyes. Otherwise, it was as though they were invisible.

I switched my vision, activating the part of my brain that was dormant in others. The familiar click followed. Everyone's clouds appeared, a billow of bright, vibrant colors surrounding them. It was beautiful in the night, like colorful, cloudy wisps hugging their shoulders.

Di, Mica and the twins caught up a while later. All four breathed heavily. I could only imagine the pace Di had set. All of us continued hiking through the brush.

"Don't you need to call Luke?" Amber asked.

"Shh, no talking unless necessary." Di turned to Mica. "Do you see anyone?"

Mica stopped and turned in a slow circle. "There's a couple on a hill west of here. They're just sitting there."

"Nobody else?" Di asked.

Mica shook her head.

Di turned to the twins. "Jet and Jasper?"

The twins closed their eyes. In their black gear, they looked like dark pillars in the night. We all waited while they worked their powers. Similar to me, the twins' powers had grown. They could now project their mental control several hundred yards from where they stood.

At least a few minutes passed before Jet opened his eyes. “They’re leaving.”

Amber cocked her head. “What’d you do to them?”

Di gave the youngest member in our group a stern look, but Jet answered anyway. “Made them think a psycho serial killer was combing the area for his next victim.”

Amber’s eyes widened in the moonlight. “You didn’t!”

Jet snickered. “Just kidding. We can’t do anything that specific, but we did make them feel death was coming for them.”

“All right, enough!” Di hissed.

With that, we began walking again. Our legs brushed against the dense shrubs and vegetation. Despite our efforts to be quiet, it made a swishing sound. We reached the military base not long later. All of us stood near the large concrete walls as Di called Luke to let him know he could leave. She warned him to be careful.

I swallowed uneasily when she hung up. Luke seemed like a very capable individual, but we’d never worked with him and we were only getting to know him. However, we were depending on him entirely.

“Get in your places.” Di pointed to various areas around the base. “Mica, Amber and Jacinda—it’s imperative you alert Jet and Jasper if you detect anyone who isn’t one of Marcus’ men.”

They all nodded.

“Has everyone tested their equipment?” I asked.

We all fiddled with our ear pieces and tiny microphones that kept us in communication. When all of the tests checked out, Di nodded. “Okay, split up. You all know where to go.”

Amber, Jacinda and Mica took off in the opposite direction toward the highest hill about a quarter mile away. The rest of us hid around the concrete structures.

At night, the place was oddly eerie. The block-like structures looked ominous and cold. I shivered as I huddled beside a wall. The unforgiving concrete felt like ice against my shoulder blades despite my layers and new jacket.

I took a deep breath and gazed skyward. Stars shone faintly above. Only the brightest could permeate the glare from the city’s lights. It was nothing like the sky in Arizona.

How I wished I was looking at this sky right now with Flint somewhere else. We could be laying on a blanket, maybe back at the ranch or outside our cave in the Rockies. Maybe even in our own backyard if we were ever lucky enough to purchase a home and live like everyone else. But at the moment, that wasn't possible.

I sighed as regret and sadness swirled inside me. I quickly shook myself out of it. I needed to be focused and ready. Marcus' men could be here at any time.

"WHERE IS HE?" Jacinda whined through the communication device. Her voice crackled in my ear.

"No kidding," Mica replied. "My feet are falling asleep."

At least an hour had passed since we reached the military base. From Jacinda's snappy question, it seemed I wasn't the only one worrying.

"He'll get here," Di replied.

"How do you know?" Jacinda asked.

"I had a vision twenty minutes ago. I saw him coming." Di said the words so practically through the communication system, as if we should have known that.

Jacinda let out an exasperated sigh. "It would have been nice if you'd passed that information along!"

"No talking, remember?" Jet piped in sarcastically.

"Oh, don't start," Jacinda warned.

I did my best to tune them out, but it was hard. Jet loved nothing more than to rile my sister up when she was worried about something. It was comforting to hear their words, however. Waiting alone in my hiding spot, while the rest of my family hid scattered around the base, felt surprisingly lonely.

"Any wolf pups on the way?" Jet taunted.

"Jet if you don't shut-up . . ."

"You'll what? Send the big, bad wolf after me?"

"I'll do a lot more than that. I'll—" Jacinda stopped mid-sentence.

"What was that? What were you saying, *beautiful*?" Jet was apparently trying to impersonate Luke's voice.

"Shh!" Jacinda hissed. "I hear something. Someone's coming!"

"Who is it?" I asked sharply.

Jacinda paused before replying, "Not sure."

A long minute ticked past. The sound of a car broke the quiet. I couldn't see it. Where I hid didn't allow me to see the road or much of anything else.

"It sounds like it could be the Toyota," Jacinda said. "Mica? What do you see?"

A few seconds passed before Mica replied, "It's Luke!"

I sighed in relief as the sound of an approaching car increased. It abruptly stopped. I strained to hear a car door open. The sound of someone jogging through the brush came a few minutes later and then Luke's voice sounded in the night.

"Where are you guys?" Luke yelled.

He obviously hadn't been listening when Di explained we were trying to *not* draw attention to ourselves. Granted, there was nobody around to draw attention from, but still.

I didn't hear anyone respond. A few seconds ticked by.

"Where's Luke?" I finally whispered. Talking through the damned communication system could be so frustrating.

A moment later, Di's voice sounded through my earpiece. "With me. I grabbed him when he walked by."

"Is everything okay?" I asked.

"Yes, we're just . . . Oh!" she exclaimed.

My breath stopped. "Di?"

She didn't respond.

My stomach clenched. I knew the sound that Di just made. I hadn't heard it in awhile, though, not since she'd become better at controlling her visions. The first time I'd heard that sound had been months ago. Then, Di, Flint and I had been driving into Little Raven to use the library. I hadn't known then how powerful Di's visions were, but the sound I just heard sounded very similar to the sound Di had made then, when she'd been pummeled with the vision of us in Chicago. I swallowed uneasily.

I waited for someone to say something, anything. Nobody did. "What'd you see? Hello?"

Nobody responded. *Why isn't anyone talking?*

"Di?" Amber's cautious voice broke through.

At least we hadn't been cut off. "Is she okay?"

Another second passed. Nothing.

"Flint? Talk to us!" I demanded.

“She’s all right,” Flint said. “Just wait a minute, everyone. Please.”

I realized Flint had run from his hiding spot to be with her. It must be bad. He wouldn’t have risked being seen unless he thought she was in trouble. If my hair was free, I’d be pulling and twisting strands with both hands right now. Flint’s voice had been quiet, worried sounding. I wondered if Di really *was* okay.

“What’s going on?” Mica asked.

“No idea. Flint, should one of us come down there?” Jasper asked.

No reply.

“I hear someone,” Jacinda said uneasily. “Cars . . . or vans . . . they sound—”

A shuffle of feet came through the microphone along with a few shaky breaths. Finally, Di spoke, “Marcus’ men . . . they . . . they picked up the tracking device. They’re coming, but I saw something else. Lena—”

A squeal of tires sounded from the road below.

They were here.

“Lena!” Di repeated but everyone began talking at once through the system. Her voice became drowned out.

It didn’t matter. There was no time. Marcus’ men were here. We needed to act. Now.

I closed my eyes as adrenaline pumped through me. I welled up my power, creating an anchor for the energy I gathered. I could feel the mens’ auras. There were ten of them. From the feel of their clouds, they were the same ten men who’d been around our Arizona home. And they weren’t far, only at the bottom of the hill.

Using their energy, I created a large ball. Its force crackled and grew. I raised it high over the van. It would render them unconscious as soon as they stepped out.

Everyone was still talking through the communication device. I could feel the anxiety and fear in their clouds.

“They’ve parked on the road,” Mica said.

“I smell ten of them!” Amber added.

“Lena!” Di said again.

Jet’s voice drowned her out. “We’re starting to manipulate them now, cover us.”

I ignored them all. Sweat trickled past my ear as my heart pounded. Any minute now, they’d step out. I needed to concentrate.

“Lena! You’re going to be—”

An explosion of sound crashed around us.

I screamed and slumped to the ground.

Pain throbbed in my head.

Dizziness made my vision swim in and out of focus.

I called out, but I couldn’t hear my own voice. It sounded as if everything was underwater and someone had detonated a nuclear device. I was certain my eardrums had burst, or if not, they’d come very close.

The feeling wouldn’t stop.

I cried in agony and gripped my head. A sharp ringing sounded in my skull over and over again. I opened my eyes. Everything was vibrating. It was as if someone had banged a tuning fork and the world was shaking out of control.

“What?” I cried. “Does anyone—” I didn’t finish my sentence. I couldn’t.

It took a second before I could stand. When I did, I swayed. The earth moved all around me.

Figures in black appeared. My family. *Or are they Marcus’ men?* I couldn’t tell.

Another swirl of dizziness hit me, threatening to make my vision go black.

No! Stay awake!

I tried to form an energy ball, but the world was still vibrating. I felt like a top that someone had spun on a table, and nothing would make the vicious spinning stop. I had no idea where I was in relation to the earth, let alone anyone else. Forming a ball right now was impossible.

I continued to grip my head. Seconds passed. Maybe a minute. The horrible ringing slowly subsided and sounds again filtered in.

Grunts. Commotion. Fighting.

Three men in black lunged at one man. It was the first thing I saw when I was able to focus. Moonlight filtered around us, but I barely made out who was who. However, I was certain of one thing. I knew the man the three had lunged at. I’d recognize those shoulders and that stance anywhere.

Flint.

Flint appeared as disoriented as me. Two men grabbed his arms. The other wrapped his arms around his legs. Flint barely fought them.

No!

That thought was followed by gripping fear. *Not Flint! They can't take him. I won't let that happen!*

I pushed away from the concrete wall just as a pair of arms grabbed me from behind.

I screamed. Instinct took over. I fought as hard as I could. Whoever held me was strong. Large hands gripped my wrists and wrenched them back. I screamed again. Pain ripped through my shoulders.

Rage clouded my head, like a dark cloud descending over the land. I formed an energy ball. It was weak compared to what I normally managed, but it was all I could produce. I hurled it toward my back. A loud bellow of pain sounded behind me. My wrists broke free.

Get Flint. Get to Flint!

Four other figures appeared, staggering around the concrete walls. They had to be the twins, Luke and Di. I swung toward where I'd last seen Flint. The cries and grunts all came from that area.

Five men now surrounded him. *Where are the other five?*

Another hand grabbed for me. I felt them then. The other five men were closing in on *me*. They were targeting me and Flint. Deliberately.

They know.

That thought flitted through my mind like a train speeding by at night. They knew Flint and I posed the biggest threat. The thought was there and then gone. It didn't matter. We had to get away.

The five men's energy drew closer. They would be upon me any second. I needed to form two balls. One for me and one for Flint.

I summoned the energy, drawing upon it, begging it to form as I demanded. I tried to separate it into two balls. I couldn't.

I fell to the ground, the strain of it buckling my knees. My head still hurt too much, but I couldn't let that stop me. *Draw the energy, Lena! Draw it together. Now!*

Footsteps sounded to my left. The men's energy was only a yard away, but I felt another energy too. Luke's. He was staggering toward me, but his energy was weak. I wasn't sure how much help he'd be.

In that moment I knew I had a choice. One choice.

It's me or Flint.

I was still too disoriented. My control was all but gone. I could feel that Luke, Di and the twins were the same. We had been rendered useless. In this state, I couldn't form two balls. Only one.

I love you.

I drew a ball. It was so weak. Standing straighter, I summoned what reserves I had and concentrated on the five men who now held Flint.

Hands grabbed me again. I didn't fight. I concentrated on what I had to do.

I threw the small, barely usable ball, a guttural cry emitting from my mouth. I concentrated as hard as I could so it would hit the men around Flint and not him. My vision swam in and out of focus.

The five men fell. All *five* fell.

Elation coursed through me just as someone picked me up and threw me over his shoulder. To my side, Luke fell to the ground. A howl sounded in the night. Clothes ripped off his back. His body convulsed. Hair sprang up along his forearms.

"Move!" someone yelled. "I have the girl!"

Ocean air swirled around my face as blood drained to my hairline. Jostling steps momentarily distracted me. Someone was carrying me over his shoulder and hurrying down the hill.

"Let me go!" I tried to fight. I kicked and screamed, but I still felt so weak.

The man carrying me grunted when my blows connected. Another man's labored breathing sounded to the side. He cleared the way for the one that carried me.

Another howl sounded back up the hill. It was stronger, more pronounced. The sound of snarls and fists connecting with flesh followed.

Luke and the twins. They're fighting!

Whoever carried me moved fast. I kicked and punched again. It didn't help. The ground continued to drift beneath me. Gravity pulled me and whoever held me down the hill.

An instinctual part of my brain kicked into action as I slowly grew stronger. My gloves came off and my ski mask disappeared. I wasn't sure if I'd pulled them off or if someone else had. All I knew was that someone was trying to force me from my location, and I couldn't let that happen.

I must have connected a few more blows because someone grunted. I barely registered it. I kicked again, adrenaline coursing through me. Another grunt sounded.

"Damn, she's stronger than I thought," a voice said, breathing heavily. He kept running.

Too fast. He's moving too fast! I need more time!

The jostling and hard push of his shoulder into my abdomen made it hard to concentrate. *Form another ball! Calm down. Form another energy ball!* Shutting my eyes tightly, I pulled up my power before tapping into the energy surrounding us. It called to me, as if an extension of myself, beckoning me to use it. The men's energy slowly crackled. My strength was returning.

Draw it together. Form it into one.

"Get her in the van!"

Van?

"What about the man?" another voice asked.

"He's too strong. It's wearing off! They're barely holding him."

Other sounds reached my ears. They were distant. Grunting, shouting, vicious snarls, someone's body part being cracked. The fighting sounded farther away as if I was no longer near my family.

"Should I detonate it again?"

"No. It'll take too long to recharge. We don't have time, and we have the woman. That's the main one he wanted."

Their words washed over me. I processed it but I didn't. *They want me? More than Flint? Why?*

I faintly registered that my hearing had returned to normal.

"Get her in the van now!" someone yelled. "He's trying to get to her! Open the door!"

That order spurred me into action. Closing my eyes, I drew the energy together. It was stronger this time. *Act now, Lena!* I mentally threw the ball as hard as I could at the man carrying me.

He doubled over, yelling in agony. I fell from his grip, landing hard on the ground. Something cracked my head. Stars clouded my vision. *No! Stay awake. You must stay awake!*

I tried to stand, to run, but my hands were behind my back. They'd tied them behind my back! *When did they do that?* Before I could push to my knees, something grabbed me again. I vaguely registered my surroundings. I lay on the ground at the bottom of the hill.

That wasn't good. I was already at the bottom of the hill.

The sound of a screeching, metal door being slid open sounded. A van stood a dozen feet away. Its door was open.

Someone picked me up again.

“Flint!” I screamed as loudly as I could.

Hard, unforgiving hands wrenched me up. Rage again clouded my mind. I turned on whoever grabbed me and kicked as hard as I could while gathering the energy from him and everyone else around us. This time, the ball formed instantly, a huge, swirling ball of blackness. It was full of rage, hate and desperation. I imagined pulling the ball back, the way a child would a rock in a slingshot, and was about to hurtle it when something pricked my neck. A cold, slithery feeling slid into my bloodstream, like oil coating my veins.

A drug.

No!

I was being drugged again, except this time, it wasn’t one of Father’s drugs. This was worse. The oily feeling swam inside me. I grunted, fighting it, and tried to fling my energy ball. If I could hit the van, they wouldn’t be able to take me, but when I sought the ball, desperately searching for that magnificent sphere of energy just waiting for me to manipulate—it was gone.

The last thing I saw, as I tried to look up the hill, was a dark figure standing at the top as five men tried to take him down. Chestnut hair ruffled in the moonlight as the men grabbed his arms, trying to wrestle him into submission.

With a fling of incredible power, Flint threw them off. The men flew ten feet in the air, their bodies as limp as rag dolls.

“LENA!” Flint yelled.

I tried to reach out, to call to him, but the drug went to my brain just as my feet left the ground. Someone was carrying me again, but now everything was fuzzy. The world grew in and out of focus. Everything began to disappear. The next thing I heard was the van door slamming closed.

Then everything went black.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Hard, jostling sensations woke me. The pain came next. Everything hurt. I opened my eyes. Darkness surrounded me.

For a moment, I lay there, trying to figure out what the hell was going on but then something bumped into me. It was hard. An abrupt movement made me roll. Another sharp twinge of pain followed. I winced. My shoulder felt on fire.

I tried to roll my shoulders, but my arms wouldn't move. Panic rose in my chest, my heart rate increasing. *My arms are pinned behind my back!* Rough zipties cut into my wrists. I tried to pull them free. The ties cut into my flesh. My eyes widened even more. *Someone tied me up!*

With panic threatening to overwhelm me, my eyes adjusted to the dark. There were shapes. I squinted and tried to decipher what was what. It seemed I lay on a floor in a box. *A box?* It was a box that moved.

Another jostle rolled me as foggy memories surfaced. I moaned when I bumped into the wall but quickly shut my mouth.

I'd been at the military base with my family. We'd been waiting for Marcus' men. Memories returned at light speed: Di having a vision, someone carrying me, fighting, an oily drug coating my insides followed by blackness.

My stomach sank. *Marcus' men took me!*

Crap. Crap. Crap.

I struggled, trying to sit up. I had to be in the van the men had thrown me in. We were apparently driving. That would explain why my shoulder hurt so badly and why I bounced all over the place. I couldn't brace myself when the van moved. The jostles, dips and wrenching were from the van driving and turning, perhaps weaving in and out of lanes. I had no idea what time it was. I didn't know how long I'd been unconscious.

You need to get out of here, but how?

I'd form an energy ball and blast it through the door. *No, that could make us veer out of control. I could end up killing myself.*

Okay, at least I was thinking somewhat clearly. Whatever drug they'd used to knock me out seemed to have worn off. I pushed against the floor with my legs and tried to sit up. I winced again when my shoulder burned. It didn't feel broken, but it hurt like crazy.

At least I was alone back here. I knew I'd heard two men when they'd thrown me in the van, but that didn't mean there weren't more.

Well, obviously, there are more.

Five men had targeted me, and five men had targeted Flint. Memories again flashed through my mind. A feeling of dread filled my stomach.

Was anyone else caught? Or hurt? Maybe killed? I tried to remember what I'd seen.

Figures had been staggering. That had to have been my family. They'd look dizzy. Whatever that awful sound blast had been affected all of us. *But were they caught?* The ten men had surrounded Flint and me, but that didn't mean they hadn't hurt the others.

Nausea threatened to overwhelm me. My heart clenched at the thought of Flint. He'd called out to me. His voice echoed in my mind. Another gut wrenching feeling engulfed me. *Is he okay? Was he caught too?*

The van lurched. It pitched me forward but then came to an abrupt halt. I slammed into the metal wall and cried out in pain. Wincing, I tried to get on my knees.

With a screeching sound, the van door opened. A bright light shone in, temporarily blinding me.

"Is this her?" someone asked.

"The small redhead," another person replied. "That's who he said to get."

It was only then I realized that my hair flew everywhere.

I blinked a few times. With a spot light shining at me, I couldn't see who was talking, but I did see outlines of three figures. It was dark behind them. *So, it's still nighttime.* That was good. It meant they hadn't had me for very long. The longer they had me, the harder it would be for the others to find me. If they could find me. *No, I can't think that way.* I'd get away from Marcus one way or another.

I switched my vision, not sure if I'd see their clouds or not in the bright light.

Nothing happened.

Frowning, I closed my eyes as the men started talking quietly. They were talking about some facility, but I didn't understand. I concentrated on my vision. Normally, when I switched it, it felt as if something clicked in my mind. Like a dormant area of my mind that wasn't normally used became active, and then people's clouds appeared. I didn't have to think about it. It just happened when I wanted to see in my altered eyesight.

But now, that click wasn't working.

My eyes flashed open. I awkwardly pushed to sitting before shimmying back to the wall. If I couldn't see or feel clouds, then I couldn't form energy balls. Fear crawled up my neck like quicksand.

"Ah boys, she looks scared," one of the men crooned. His voice made my skin crawl. "Don't worry, sugar. We'll take good care of you."

He reached forward, bending as if to grab me.

I lashed out, kicking him square in the back of his hand. My heavy boot caused tendon and bone to shift.

He howled in pain and pulled back. "You'll pay for that, bitch!"

One of the other guys laughed. "Looks like we've got a live one, boys."

The third guy didn't say anything. I glanced warily in his direction. Since the spot light was still on, I couldn't see his face, just his outline.

I tried again to switch my vision. Nothing happened.

"What did you give me?" I demanded. I was glad my voice sounded strong and defiant. "Back in Marin, when you injected a drug in my neck, what was it?"

"Oh, just a little cocktail made especially for you." He was the one whose hand I had smashed. "Are you feeling a little weak? Are things not working like they normally do?"

And then I understood.

I knew what they'd given me. Luke said he, Susannah and Edgar had all been drugged when kept in O'Brien's underground facility, so they couldn't transform into their animal forms. They'd been given a daily dose. It suppressed their abilities.

I thought quickly.

Susannah had been able to turn into an eagle when she woke in Arizona. I still remembered when Susannah had tried to claw me to death when she'd woken on the couch. Within twenty-four hours, they'd all been able to transform.

If it was the same drug that meant it would be twenty-four hours before I'd be able to form an energy ball. And that was only *if* they didn't drug me again. I'd have to find a way to prevent the next dose.

It was my only chance.

"Where are we?" I asked.

"Wouldn't you like to know." It was the one who'd commented that I looked like a live one.

"What are your names?"

The man laughed. "What is this? Twenty questions?"

"Nah," the other one chuckled. "She's just trying to get to know us. You know how captives all do it. How they show us that they're people with feelings and dreams. How they try and make us want to help them and let them go." He laughed again. It was an ugly sound. I knew without a doubt he had a black cloud.

"Well, I suppose I could make names up for you if you won't tell me yours," I replied. "What do you prefer? Dumb or Dumber? Oh, wait, that's perfect. Dumb and Dumber. There we go. I guess I don't need to know your names after all."

An arm snaked out and grabbed my ankle. Dumb or Dumber, I wasn't sure which one, yanked me from the wall and skidded me across the metal floor. I almost yelped in pain but stopped myself.

There was one thing I'd accomplished, however, by baiting them. I was now outside. They'd pulled me out of the van until I fell to the ground. I landed hard on the pavement and gritted my teeth. We were in an industrial part of some city. I didn't know if it was still San Francisco or not. It depended on how long I'd been unconscious in the van. If it had been less than an hour, I was probably still in the city, but if it was more than that, I could be anywhere.

Dumber clicked off the bright light while Dumb pulled his leg back as if he were going to kick me.

Instinctively, I pulled my knees up and protected my abdomen as best I could with my hands tied behind my back, but the blow didn't come. The third man placed his hand on Dumb's shoulder.

"Enough. Let's get her inside."

His voice was deep and held a ring of authority. Dumb lowered his leg but flashed me a malevolent smile. In the moonlight, I could make out some of their features. Dumb wasn't tall. He was the shortest of the three. He had

short hair, maybe blond since it didn't look dark in the moonlight. I had no idea about his eye color, but I did see a wide mouth and pug nose. I darted a look at Dumber as the third man reached down and pulled me to my feet. The third man wasn't gentle, but at least he didn't seem intent on causing me additional pain.

Standing, I was better able to assess everyone's builds. Dumb wasn't much taller than my five foot two, so I guessed he was around five seven. Dumber was tall but thin. Maybe six feet with a lean build. He appeared to have dark hair and what looked like a jagged scar on his cheek. The third man, the one I hadn't named yet, took a step back once I was steady. He turned so I couldn't see his face clearly, but I detected something different about him. I didn't know what it was, but something felt funny.

I wished at that moment, more than anything, that I could form an energy ball. I'd hurl it at all three of them and be running before they knew what hit them.

"What's your name?" I asked the third guy.

Dumb and Dumber chuckled and made a few lewd comments. None of which were worth hearing or acknowledging.

"Tell me your name," I said more forcefully to the third guy.

He looked at me then. I almost took a step back, but the van hit my knees and stopped me.

His eyes *glowed*. They actually flickered and swirled, like glowing embers stirred in his irises.

"Raven," he replied.

Raven? I didn't get a chance to ask anything further because Dumber, the one with the scar, pushed me, telling me to walk toward a building. I tried to glance at Raven again, but he fell behind us.

However, the dark, cold looking building they pushed me toward wasn't what dominated my thoughts. Instead, it was the fire eyed man who walked several steps behind me.

Without a doubt, I knew I'd just met another lost child.

That thought made me grow cold as Dumb and Dumber prodded me along. Luke, Edgar and Susannah hadn't mentioned anybody else like us in the underground facility they'd been imprisoned in. They'd have told us if there were other survivors.

Father hadn't known about any more either. *So, what does that mean? Is there another project, in addition to Project Renatus? Or is Raven an*

anomaly? Was he a stolen child that was experimented on completely separately to the original three groups of ten children?

The group I'd been in, with the twins, Di, Flint, Jacinda, Mica and Amber had originally been a group of ten. But a set of twins had died after they'd developed encephalopathy from their drug. The same could be said for the seven other children in Luke, Edgar and Susannah's group. They'd all died when Marcus continued experimenting on them, pushing their brains further than they could tolerate.

And the third group of ten had all died. That had been Albert Darlington's research group. Father had said he ran the elemental group.

So where does that leave Raven? Was he in the third group or a secret group Father never knew about? Father never said much about Albert's group, and Luke said that they'd all died. *But did they?*

We approached the large building and Dumb reached out and opened a steel door. It made a grating sound in the night.

"Ladies first," he said sarcastically. He pushed me again.

For a second, I stood rooted to the spot. I knew once I went in that building, the chances of me ever getting out were minimal. Trying as hard as I could, I closed my eyes to form an energy ball.

I couldn't.

I did the next best thing I could think of. I whirled around faster than he'd been expecting and nailed him in the shin with my boot before taking off at a run. The pavement pounded underneath my feet. A thrilling zing ran through me. *I might get away!*

A wall of fire suddenly erupted in my path.

Ten foot tall flames licked the ground, almost double my height. Its heat was scorching. Gasping, I careened to a stop. With my hands bound behind my back, Dumber grabbed me and yanked me back to the door.

I looked wide eyed at Raven. He stood calmly by the building, that glowing in his eyes swirling a crimson orange color, even brighter than before. Abruptly, the flames vanished. His eyes returned to the smoldering inferno they'd been initially.

"You can create fire," I whispered.

Raven just stared at me. His expression gave away nothing.

He is *from the elemental group!*

Dumb scowled, his leg bent as he rubbed it. He grabbed my upper arm, his fingers digging into my bicep as he pulled me to him.

“You’re really going to pay now,” he said under his breath. His words chilled me. I had no doubt he meant it.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Dumb shoved me into the building.

Lights flicked on when we stepped inside. It appeared to be a hanger of some sort, but it was empty. Nothing but a huge, vacant room greeted us. The air inside was cold and dry. There weren't any windows or anything that would tell me where I was.

"Cozy, isn't it?" Dumb said.

I ignored him.

Dumber poked me in the back. "Move."

My heavy boots echoed as we walked. With wide eyes, I frantically looked around. Other than the door behind us, there wasn't an exit to escape from. The only other door was in the back corner. They were prodding me toward it.

Dumb and Dumber continued to make lewd sounds and whispered comments as if sharing private jokes. I didn't want to know what those jokes were. The farther they pushed me toward that door, the more vulnerable I realized I was.

I took comfort in one thing. Raven. I never heard him join in Dumb and Dumber's berating comments. He walked steadily, not saying a word.

My hands clenched at my sides. "What are you going to do with me?"

Dumb sighed. "Still asking questions."

Anger bubbled up. I tamped it down. It wouldn't help if I kept baiting him. All that would do was get me hurt. Or worse, killed. We were almost to the door, and I didn't want to know what waited on the other side.

"Raven, how long have you been working with Marcus?" My voice caught.

No response other than a few snickers from the duo.

"We're the same, you know," I continued in a hurry. The door was only a few yards away. "You're no different than me."

"Is that right, Red?" From the tone, I knew it was Dumber. "You hear that Trevor? They're no different."

Trevor. So Dumb's name is Trevor. Trevor was the short one with blond hair, and . . . I peeked awkwardly over my shoulder. Blue eyes. When Trevor caught me looking at him, he shoved my shoulder. I grimaced in pain. It was my sore one.

Since my hands were still tied behind my back, I almost tripped, but that wasn't before I got a better look at Dumber. He was tall and lean with muddy brown hair and that jagged scar. Raven walked just behind them. Like his name, his hair was midnight black. He also had olive skin.

I almost tripped. *Dark hair and olive skin.*

My heart thundered a hundred miles an hour. Raven had dark hair, olive skin and a build very similar to Flint's.

It can't be.

"Here you go, Princess." Dumber reached around me to open the door. "Your palace awaits."

With a twist of the handle, the door swung open.

A dim corridor appeared, but I was too consumed with the man that stood behind me to care. *Is Raven related to Di and Flint? But how can that be?* Father never mentioned anything about them having another sibling. Surely he would have told us if they did.

No, I'm just making connections where there aren't any.

I was feeling desperate and alone, my mind jumping to conclusions in hopes of making anything about this situation better.

Trevor pushed me as I stood in the door frame. I stumbled into a long, narrow hallway. He flicked a light switch. Light flooded the hall revealing a line of doors on the right. No windows in here either. It was as quiet as a tomb.

Either Trevor or Dumber grabbed my upper arms and propelled me to the second door. Trevor placed a key into a lock. I watched meticulously as blood whooshed through my ears. All thoughts of Raven vanished. It appeared I was going to be locked in a room, and the more I learned about how it was locked, where it was located and how it was accessed, the better chance I had of escaping.

The sound of the key grating on metal as it slid into the lock filled the void. Nobody said anything, but Dumber's hands tightened on my biceps almost painfully. When the door opened, he cut my wrist restraints with a quick slice, from what felt like a knife, and shoved me inside.

I reached out to steady myself. My arm muscles protested at the sudden uninhibited movement. It was inky dark in the room. I swirled around just as they started to shut the door.

“Wait!” I called. The door kept closing, but I managed to make eye contact with Raven for the merest second. “Raven, you have a brother and sister!”

The desperate words bubbled out of me as the door slammed. The room turned into a sea of inky black.

My panicked breathing sounded in the quiet. Nothing came through the door. Not even the sound of their retreating footsteps. I tried to stay calm, but icy chills ran up my spine. I wasn’t sure if Raven had heard me. Perhaps it wouldn’t matter if he had. Maybe he knew about Flint and Di but didn’t care. Or, most likely, they weren’t related and just happened to look similar.

Stay calm. Don’t panic. Just whatever you do, don’t panic. Already it felt as if my heart would burst. The gravity of my situation pummeled me like snow coming down an avalanche. The weight of it threatened to crush the life right out of me. I was currently locked in a room with no lights, no help and no way of knowing if I’d ever get out.

“Hello?” My call didn’t echo. The room couldn’t be that big. “Is anyone else in here?”

No response.

I tentatively reached out. My hand encountered the door I’d just stepped through. It was cold and felt like metal, smooth but also slightly rough. I trailed my hand along it. The metallic feel continued until it turned to a rougher texture. I’d reached the wall beside the door. I flattened my palm and inched it up and down. There were grooves within the wall, both vertical and horizontal. I ran my hands along it, trying to decipher what it was.

I kept that up until I reached the first corner, then the answer hit me.

Concrete block.

I was in a concrete cell. In other words, practically sound proof and most definitely difficult to break through. Even if I formed a huge energy ball, I didn’t know if it would penetrate eight inches of concrete.

Moving along the wall, I carefully felt my way to the second corner. “Two,” I said out loud.

Taking more careful steps, I shuffled to the next corner. “Three.”

So far, it was concrete block the entire way. I continued until I reached the fourth corner and then rounded the corner until I brushed the door texture again. My initial impression had been correct. This room was small. Doing it all again, I felt my way along the wall, except this time, I walked toe to heel to better assess the room's size.

After going around the room three times, I did the same with the floor, feeling along the smooth concrete but finding nothing. I figured the cell measured roughly eight by ten feet. Not much bigger than a large walk-in closet. I backed up to the first wall, by the door, wrapped my arms around myself and sank to the floor. Pitch blackness still surrounded me. It made this room more terrifying.

The hard, concrete floor was cold and unforgiving. The backs of my legs cooled against it. I drew my knees up and burrowed into a ball.

It was only then the tears came.

My eyes misted over. A feeling of absolute despair settled in my chest, like an elephant sitting on me. A sob constricted my throat as tears poured down my face. *I may never be free again. I may never see my family again . . . never see Flint again. No!*

Marcus had caught me, and I was alone.

Worst of all, I had no idea if my family was okay and safe. I had no idea if Flint was all right or what had happened to him. He could be hurt. He could have been captured too. *Everyone* could have been captured. Perhaps we'd been taken to separate facilities.

I pictured the other doors in this hall. *Is this a facility O'Brien created when they kidnapped small children? Was this once a cell for another lost child?*

I slumped against the wall, falling on my side in a fetal position. Harsh sobs wracked my body. It was the only sound in the dark room.

HOURS PASSED WITH nothing but blackness and silence. After my tears dried up, I'd tried everything I could think of to open the door, but the lock was impenetrable. And the hinges were on the outside. There was no way to pick those either.

It was awful, being alone in a dark cell. My mind spun in a thousand directions. I kept wondering about my family. Not knowing if they were okay was torture. I also wondered how in the world Marcus' men had snuck up on us and what that sound machine had been. It was like a weapon. I

could only imagine the damage to Jacinda's ears. My ears still faintly rang, but I didn't think my eardrums had burst.

At some point, I fell asleep. It had to be the early hours of the morning by now, and as hard as I tried, I couldn't stay awake. The absolute blackness didn't help. My brain automatically went into nighttime mode.

The noise of a key sliding into the lock woke me. I immediately straightened, wincing. Between my sore shoulder and the cold, hard floor leaving a crick in my neck, I felt like a train wreck. It didn't help that when the door opened I bolted to standing. It sent a searing pain down my arm. Taking a step back, I instinctively reached for the switch in my brain to activate my ability. Nothing happened. Trembling, I readied myself for whatever was to come.

Light from the hall seeped inside. I blinked. It was crazy how harsh the light looked after being in a room completely devoid of any illumination.

"Lena?"

Raven. And apparently, he knew my name. I'd never told it to him. That meant Marcus *had* deliberately sought me out.

"Yeah, I'm here." A ray of hope bloomed in my chest. Maybe Raven had thought about what I said. Perhaps he was coming back to ask me about Di and Flint.

"I'm here to take you to the bathroom."

The hope in my chest crumpled like a discarded balled up piece of garbage.

"Turn around. I'm going to cuff you."

There was no gentleness in his tone, only practicality. I reminded myself Di and Flint were the same. They both got straight to the point and never beat around the bush. The small rationally functioning part of my brain knew I was grasping at straws, but I needed hope right now. Maybe Raven really *was* their sibling.

Instead of turning around, I faced him and stared directly at him.

For the first time, I got a good look at him. He had deep-set, dark eyes, a straight nose, dark unruly hair, and an identical olive skin tone that welled up memories of my love for someone else. My breath sucked in as my gaze wandered over his features. Hope grew even stronger in me. It was like looking at a younger, slightly altered version of Flint.

He's got to be their brother! "You have a brother and sister."

His face remained impassive. "Turn around."

“You look just like them.”

“I said, turn around.” His tone grew hard.

He’s not going to believe you and you need to get out of here. Now, Lena. Now’s your chance to escape!

I made a move to turn. Raven reached into his back pocket. The jingle of metal came next. Handcuffs. Just as he pulled them free, I shoved him. Hard.

He stumbled back as I pushed past him.

The hall was exactly as I remembered. No windows. Eerily quiet. Fluorescent lights overhead. The closed door waiting at the end. My only way out.

I took off at a sprint. My shoulder burned as my arms pumped.

Get to the door! My lungs protested from the frantic sprint. But the door neared. *Only a few feet away!*

A wall of fire erupted in my path.

I screamed and fell backward, my butt landing hard on the concrete. The fire grew, growing to the ceiling. It was an impenetrable wall of flames.

Heat from it licked at my face making me scramble back. I bumped into something. Shoes appeared by my thighs.

Raven stared down at me with an annoyed expression. “Do you need help getting up?”

I inched away from him and stood. He merely raised an eyebrow, the annoyed expression now gone.

He looks just like Flint.

Raven lifted the handcuffs. “Turn around.” He sighed. “Please.”

I put my arms behind my back as he instructed. There was no point fighting him. I couldn’t form energy balls, and I couldn’t walk through a wall of fire. As soon as the cold metal handcuffs locked around my wrists the fire disappeared. Only a thin black line remained on the floor. It was the only evidence of Raven’s power.

“Follow me.”

He grabbed my arm and pulled me down the hall. I leaned backward, trying to slow us down.

“Their names are Di and Flint. I grew up with them.” My hair brushed against my cheek when I peered up at him, trying to gauge his reaction.

He gazed straight ahead, his expression blank.

“You look like them. They have dark hair and olive skin too, and your features and build are similar to Flint’s.”

It smelled stale in here, as if the building never got fresh air.

“How long have you been with Marcus?”

He remained silent. The only sounds were our footsteps.

“Father . . . I mean Conroy, never said anything about you.”

His stride faltered for the merest second, but it was such a quick fleeting movement, I could have imagined it.

“I don’t remember you,” I continued when he refused to respond. “Do you know how old you are? Or what group you were in? We thought everyone else in O’Brien’s experiments had died.”

Raven continued walking. His presence felt like a heavy shadow looming above me.

He stopped me at a door at the end of the hallway, gripping my shoulder so I wouldn’t pass the door. It wasn’t a harsh grip, like Dumber’s, but was just enough pressure to let me know I should stop.

We’d passed at least half a dozen doors in the hall, which I could only assume were other concrete cells. I hadn’t heard anything. I wasn’t sure if that meant they were empty, or perhaps their occupants were sleeping. A sick feeling swirled in my stomach. This place was like a prison, only no windows, no bars and no rules. They could do with me as they pleased.

“Bathroom’s right here.” The door he indicated looked the same as all the others: cold, metallic and sinister. Anything could be behind it. “I’ll wait out here,” he added.

Since my arms were behind my back, he opened the door before switching the lights on. A hum sounded when the harsh fluorescents lit up. I stepped into the small, cramped room. It held a simple pedestal sink and toilet. The floor and walls were concrete. There wasn’t a mirror. No windows either. He closed the door behind me, the sound deafening.

The first thing I did was scan the area for something, anything, that I could use as a weapon. I groaned. Nothing. The room was too basic.

With slumped shoulders, I shimmied down my pants. It wasn’t easy. Between my hands tied behind my back and sore shoulder, it took forever to get them down. Getting them back on proved just as challenging. I could have sworn I was in there for triple the amount of time.

When finished, I kicked the door and not just to let him know I was done. Anger flashed through me again.

Raven opened the door. His fire filled eyes met mine. His jet black hair was just like Di's, but the way it stood up at all angles while slightly curling at the ends, was like Flint's. His skin tone was the same as theirs, like warm honey. If he had the same heritage as Di and Flint, he'd always look tan, even in the dead of winter. His eyes though, were obviously unique. Their swirling, orange and red hue looked like smoldering embers just waiting to be ignited.

He cocked an eyebrow as I stood there staring at him.

I didn't bother trying to hide my irritation. "Do you think you could untie my hands next time?"

He actually blushed. "Oh, right. Sorry."

Huffing, I glanced down the hall. He tensed and stepped in front of me. "Don't try running again."

"Or what? You'll fry me?"

For a brief second, his lips tugged up. Pulling me forward, he propelled me to the end of the hall, deeper into the hanger. Another door waited at the end. Cold dread slithered around me like a coiling snake.

I again pulled back, trying to slow us. It didn't help. "What are we doing now?"

Raven grasped the door handle before swinging it open. "Now, you're meeting Marcus."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Those four words made my gut grow cold.

Now I meet Marcus. I'm going to see Marcus again.

The last time I saw Marcus had only been two weeks ago, when my family and I broke into O'Brien's warehouse to rescue Luke, Susannah and Edgar. Marcus had appeared while I'd been alone planting bombs. The way his outline hovered in the doorway, as cool night air swirled his trench coat around his legs was ingrained in my memory. He'd been so sure we'd be captured. But he'd underestimated me. I'd blasted him out of the warehouse into the parking lot behind it. From there, I'd ran and we'd all escaped.

My cheeks flushed when Raven prodded me inside. With trepidation, I stepped forward.

The room we entered was the exact opposite to the rest of the hanger. For one, it was carpeted. The soft texture muted our footsteps. I stopped at the threshold, staring in surprise.

Thankfully, there was no sign of Marcus.

Similar to the rest of the building, this room held no windows. However, that wasn't what drew my attention. Instead, it was everything else. Ornate furnishings surrounded a glowing gas fireplace. The fireplace stood in the middle of the room. Glass encompassed all four corners of it, so no matter where you were, you could see the bluish flames.

On the far wall stood built-in bookshelves. Most of the shelves were empty. A few had rows of novels. Music played softly from surround sound speakers. Beethoven's ninth symphony. A dining table and chairs were set up to the right. Dishes and juice glasses sat on it. A basket of pastries and a bowl of freshly cut up fruit filled the middle of the table. Scents of coffee drifted toward me.

My stomach grumbled. I hadn't eaten since last night, and I was guessing it was morning now.

A jangle of keys sounded. Raven's hands brushed mine when he unlocked the handcuffs. I shook my arms when they were loose.

“Have a seat.” Raven gestured toward the table.

My gaze darted to the door.

Raven’s hand clamped around my bicep. His eyes swirled brighter. “Lena, have a seat.” His tone was calm but firm.

I tried to wrench my arm free.

His grip tightened and a small fire erupted a few feet from me, burning in mid-air.

My eyes widened.

“Sit.”

I didn’t want to. I wanted to kick and flail and act like a raving lunatic to show him I wouldn’t be so easily controlled. We both stood staring at one another. Tension oozed between us, like electrically charged particles right before a thunderstorm, as if neither was sure what the other would do next. His grip tightened. A fire erupted inches from my face.

I sighed. “Fine, I’ll sit, but can you tell me what time it is?”

The fire extinguished. “Just after seven in the morning.”

So I’d been missing for around eight hours. Eight hours of Flint having no idea where I was or what was being done to me. And eight hours where I had no idea where he was or what was being done to *him*. And sixteen hours before I’d have my powers back. I swallowed thickly.

“Are you going to have a seat now?”

The carpet sank under my boots as I walked to the table.

Raven gripped my arm the entire way. I expected him to pull out the chair across from me and join me for breakfast, but he didn’t.

“Aren’t you going to sit too?”

He shook his head and walked to the far bookshelf.

The sound of a door opening made my gaze fly to the corner of the room. A door blended into the wood paneling.

My breath stopped as Marcus appeared. Raven barely glanced up.

Marcus stepped into the room. Cold eyes met mine. He was dressed immaculately in a three piece charcoal gray suit and tie. Dark, leather shoes covered his feet. His hair was expertly styled and as he drew closer, I smelled a hint of expensive cologne.

All hunger rumblings vanished. I straightened in my seat, my legs tensing, ready to jump at any second. Marcus just smiled, his eyes never leaving mine.

He looked exactly as he had on the news segments, minus the scrape on his cheek. Cold, calculating and deadly. Like a shark circling its prey.

“Galena.” He pulled out the chair across from me and sat gracefully.

Everything about him hinted at a privileged upbringing: his clothes, manicured fingernails, expert haircut, everything. I figured he was as rich as Father.

Marcus fluffed the large, linen napkin beside his plate and settled it on his lap. “It’s nice to see you again.”

A memory crashed upon me so suddenly, I gasped. It was of being tied to a metal gurney, while Marcus stood above me, smiling as he filled a syringe. I couldn’t have been older than four. I’d been terrified as I stared at him. Father hadn’t been in the facility that day, and Marcus had taken advantage of that. When I’d peed myself as he poked me maliciously with the needle, he’d simply looked at my urine soaked pants and shook his head. *“Really Galena, you’re old enough to know better than that.”* The medicine had burned as it crawled up my veins. I’d started crying then, silent tears rolling down my cheeks. I’d wished so badly that Father was there. He’d never hurt me like that. The few times Father had given me a drug, he’d held me on his lap, crooning to me.

But not Marcus. Throughout it all, Marcus had just raised an eyebrow at my trembling figure, continuing with his work as if I were merely an inconsequential pion.

“You look quite pale.” His voice pulled me back to the present. He reached for the pastries. “Hungry?” He held the basket out for me.

His eyes were gray and empty of emotion. I wondered if he ever felt anything. He was completely devoid of empathy—I’d learned that much as a small child. Now, sitting in front of him as an adult, I still felt terrified. I wished I could throw the basket in his face or spit in his orange juice, but all I did was stare. Fear once again coated me, making me incapacitated.

It was exactly how I’d initially felt in the Chicago warehouse two weeks ago. Only then, I’d had my ability to call upon.

Now, I had nothing.

A flushed feeling crept up my cheeks again and more than anything, I wanted to bolt, but I knew that was useless. One, I sat as frozen as a statue, like a scared rabbit, hunted and cornered, unable to move. And two, I had no power. Without being able to form energy balls, and with Raven

standing quietly by the bookshelf, thumbing through a book, I had no way of escaping.

My shoulders slumped. Despair swam through me.

Knowing I needed to keep my strength up, as nauseated as I felt at the thought of eating, I hesitantly took a warm roll. It flaked a little in my grip. I sniffed it. It didn't smell poisoned.

Marcus picked up a pot. "Now, coffee or tea?"

After a few awkward minutes, in which Marcus presented me with food, and I reluctantly took a small helping of everything—we sat facing each other with full plates and steaming cups of coffee. He began eating first. I hesitantly followed. His first question, however, almost make me choke.

"How did you like your time in San Francisco?"

I hastily took a drink of juice to keep from coughing uncontrollably. *What is this? Small talk?* My mind raced. He'd said, how *did* you.

Does that mean I'm no longer in the city? Am I even in California?

"Where are we?"

Marcus cocked his head. "Didn't Conroy teach you better manners? It's rude to be so direct."

"Why did you take me?"

He leaned back in his chair, sighing. "Such manners."

I balked. "You really think manners apply to this situation? You've kidnapped me, drugged me and are holding me prisoner!"

Marcus eyed me coldly. "I hardly think taking back what's mine is qualified as kidnapping."

"You think I'm yours?"

"Of course you are, just as the others you grew up with are."

My mouth dropped. "So what are we to you? Pets?"

He chuckled and dabbed at the corners of his mouth with his napkin. "Hardly. You're like children to me."

My blood boiled so hot I felt my cheeks flush red. I shoved my plate away and stood so abruptly my chair tumbled over. It barely made a sound when it hit the thick carpet. "I will *never* belong to you!"

Marcus raised an eyebrow as Raven raced over from the bookshelf. I'm not entirely sure why. It's not as though I was a threat. Without my ability to see and manipulate clouds, I was a defenseless woman who's only weapon was her heavy boots. Perhaps I could pull one leg back and nail

Marcus squarely in the shin. It would hardly immobilize him, but it would leave a nasty bruise. I smiled inwardly at the thought.

"Galena, please, that's enough. Calm down."

Marcus' unflappable demeanor dampened my anger. Fear crept into its place. He truly didn't seem to care what he did to me or my family. We were simply pawns to him, in the larger plan he had for O'Brien. Whatever that was.

"Sit *down*." Marcus' gaze never left mine.

Raven righted the chair. I reluctantly sat. Raven returned to the bookshelf. Not once had he met my gaze since Marcus entered the room.

Marcus raised an eyebrow. "It doesn't have to be like this. I have much to offer you."

I eyed him skeptically.

"If you cooperate, you'll find it will work to your advantage."

"Where's my family?" The question escaped me before I could stop it. I knew Marcus would most likely lie, tell me he had all of them and would torture them until I did what he wanted. It's why I hadn't asked anyone. I wondered if Raven would tell me the truth. I knew Dumber and Trevor certainly wouldn't.

Marcus leaned back in his chair, his cold gaze assessing me. After a second, he leaned forward and reached for his coffee. "I don't know."

My heart pounded. "What do you mean, *you don't know?"*

"I mean that I have no idea where they are. They all escaped last night, which is fine, for the time being. You are who I wanted initially."

Joy burst through me, but at the same time, I told myself to control it. "How do I know I can believe you?"

"You can't." He wiped his mouth and put his napkin on the table. His plate was empty. I hadn't realized he'd kept eating after I'd jumped from my chair.

"What about Raven?" I sensed Marcus was about to stand. For some reason, I felt bad things were coming once that happened.

"What *about* Raven?" Marcus asked coldly.

"Why haven't you told him he has a brother and sister?"

Raven had been thumbing through a book, but his movements froze.

Marcus raised an eyebrow. "What makes you think he has a brother and sister?"

“He looks just like Di and Flint, but I don’t understand. Father . . . I mean Conroy, never said anything about them having another sibling. Did you split them up at birth? Is that why we didn’t know about Raven?”

Marcus’ eyes narrowed. “You’re making assumptions where you shouldn’t.”

“Why? Because then Raven might want to meet them? Maybe learn more about the blood family he has? The brother and sister who would be thrilled to meet him?”

“His blood family is *dead*.”

“*No*, they’re not. They’re alive and well, and I’m guessing, at this very moment, looking for me, and if they knew about him, they’d be looking for him too.”

“He’s not related to them!” Veins bulged in Marcus’ neck. He gripped the table tightly. Marcus’ perfectly cool exterior evaporated. His chest rose and fell as his eyes flashed daggers.

Raven watched, his mouth dropping.

I bit my tongue. Sweat erupted on my brow. Once again, the four-year-old inside of me whimpered.

Marcus continued to gaze at me, visibly struggling to compose himself. A few long seconds passed before he reached up and smoothed back his hair.

In a way, it was oddly fascinating to watch him rein in the monster. The rapid breathing and protruding veins disappeared. The manic gleam in his eyes fell back, as if being closed behind a curtain. Once again, those irises were devoid of emotion.

I knew better than to say anything else about Raven. I wouldn’t put it past Marcus to torture me to teach me a lesson, but I had learned one thing. Marcus didn’t want the subject brought up that Raven may be related to Flint and Di.

It only further convinced me they *were* related.

“Now, since you’re done eating, please come with me. There are a few things we need to do.” His cool words flowed over me before he rose elegantly from the table.

MARCUS TOOK ME through the door in the corner of the room, the one he’d entered through. I tried to resist, but Raven followed, forcing me to move. I tried to make eye contact with Raven before he fell behind me,

but he wouldn’t meet my gaze. The more I studied him, however, the more I was convinced he was Di and Flint’s sibling.

There was no way he *wasn’t* related to them. It would be like saying Jet and Jasper weren’t brothers when it was so obvious they were. In the carpeted room, I’d seen a few of Raven’s mannerisms. The way he’d ran his hand through his hair a few times, while I was talking to Marcus—it was like watching Flint. Or the way Raven eyed me coolly, assessing me like a specimen under a microscope—it was just like Di.

My boots made sounds again, once we left the strange sanctuary. The door in the corner led to another concrete hallway. Marcus stopped at the first door and opened it.

“After you.”

Everything in me screamed not to go.

Marcus’ gaze hardened. “Galena . . .”

A small flame erupted on the floor behind me. I jumped. Hesitantly, I walked forward since it seemed my options were either entering the room or being burned to death.

A light flicked on when I stepped inside. The room was small with a metal tray, a small cabinet, a chair and what looked like a hospital examination table. Vials of drugs lined a metal tray. A syringe and needle lay beside it. My stomach plummeted.

“Have a seat on the table.” Marcus walked around me and picked up the syringe.

“*No*,” I whispered. I knew what he was going to do.

“Unfortunately, you don’t have a choice in the matter.” Marcus picked up the vial and plunged the syringe into it. “From that impressive display of your powers the other week, I’m afraid you need to be subdued. It won’t do to have you harming myself or Raven.” He filled the syringe. “I will say that power you conjured piqued my interest. I had no idea you would grow so strong. So many interesting things to study now. However, until I can trust you to not hurt those around you, you need to be kept in line. This drug,” he put the vial back down and flicked the remaining air bubbles to the top of the syringe, “is the only way to guarantee that. Now, you either get on that table willingly or Raven will help you.”

I whirled around, my curls flying with me. “Raven, please! Please, don’t do this! You have a family! I swear! Di and Flint, they’re your

siblings! Please, help me and I'll take you to them! You're just like us, I swear! And then you'll be free—"

Something pricked my neck.

I flailed my arms, but it was too late. Marcus pulled his hand back. The syringe was empty.

The oily feeling once again coated my veins. The drug swam through my bloodstream like a swimmer being pulled by a current. I was helpless to stop it.

"Raven . . ." I begged, but once again, my eyes grew heavy.

"Take her back to her cell. Leave her there until I call for her again."

The voice sounded fuzzy and strange. My vision swam in and out of focus before blackness once again descended.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

A heavy, pounding filled my skull. I moaned. My head ached in the worst way. Slowly, I opened my eyes. Blackness was everywhere. I groaned in disgust. *Why am I always waking up in the dark?* The damned headache only made it worse.

Whatever I lay on was cold, hard and incredibly uncomfortable. The anger slowly vanished as panic set in. I reached out, hurriedly feeling everywhere. Nothing but a cold, hard surface greeted me. *Where am I?*

"Hello?" I said.

"Shh," a voice replied.

I bolted upright. "Who's there?" I stared into the inky darkness.

"It's me. Raven."

The voice sounded as if it came from a few feet away. "Raven?"

It all came crashing back then. Marcus had drugged me. I'd passed out again. *I must be back in my concrete cell, and Raven is in here with me.*

A small flame erupted in the corner of the room. It illuminated the walls and the figure huddled beside it. His midnight locks were shadowed in the flame, but his eyes glowed a fiery orange.

Being able to see made my heart rate slow, at least a little. "What are you doing here?" I inched back and pulled my knees up.

"Waiting for you to wake up."

"Why?"

He shrugged.

"What time is it? How long did I sleep?" I rubbed my eyes. It was so hard to know what time it was in this perpetual darkness.

A screen lit up. He had a smart phone. "Just after noon." He put the phone back in his pocket.

I eyed him. Since Raven was in here, that must mean he stayed with me after Marcus drugged me.

"Why are you here, Raven?" It was strange. I didn't feel scared or weirded out that he'd sat beside me while I slept, but I was curious *why*

he’d spend four hours sitting in a dark cell waiting for me to wake up.

His eyes glowed that swirling orange. I wondered how he went out in public. Eyes like that would garner attention in a hurry.

“Did Marcus tell you to stay with me? Did he want to know when I woke up?”

“No.”

“Then are you going to tell me why you’re here?” I couldn’t keep the irritation from my voice. I was cold, scared and damned angry about being continually drugged against my will.

Raven still wouldn’t meet my gaze. If I didn’t know better, I’d say he looked embarrassed.

I leaned back against the wall. If he wasn’t here for Marcus, I could only think of one other reason for why he’d hide in here, waiting for me to wake up.

“Do you want to know about Di and Flint?”

A few seconds passed. He gave the barest hint of a nod.

My heart pounded. I abruptly felt wide awake, headache or not. I had no idea how long we had and there was so much we needed to discuss.

“I’ll tell you everything you want to know, but I first need to know more about where you came from. How is it that we didn’t know about you? There wasn’t anybody else in the warehouse when we blew it up, so you obviously weren’t there. Right?”

He shook his head. “No. I never went there. I didn’t know about it until a month ago.”

“Then where have you been living?”

“With my dad, Marcus.”

My eyes bulged. “Your *dad?”*

“Yeah, I mean, he’s not my biological father, but my adopted one. He adopted me when I was an infant.”

“And you believe that?”

He glanced down, his shoulders hunching forward. “He’d never tell me where I came from or who my parents were, but I always knew . . .” The silence stretched.

“You knew what?”

“That he was lying about something.”

I breathed shallowly. “You’re right. He’s been lying to you your entire life if he didn’t tell you about us—Di, Flint, Jacinda, Jet, Jasper, Mica,

Amber, Savannah, Luke, Edgar and all of the other lost children that were killed over the years in O'Brien's experiments. They're all like us. You're one of us."

His eyebrows drew together. "What do you mean?"

I sighed in frustration and waved at the flame. "*That's* what I mean."

"So all of you really *can* do strange things too?"

I nodded. An aching five seconds passed with nothing but silence stretching between us.

"Okay, tell me," he finally said.

I let out the breath I was holding. "I think you need to know the truth and understand the things that Marcus has done."

He frowned warily. "What kinds of things?"

I summarized my origins and everyone else's as quickly as possible: how we'd been born on the streets, how our parents hadn't cared about us and abused us horribly, how Conroy, Marcus and Albert Darlington stole us from our abusive homes to be subjects in Project Renatus. And from there, how they'd forced drugs into us which created our abilities. Lastly, about all of the lost children over the years who'd been killed *because* of those drugs. I then told him what part Conroy, Marcus and Albert had played in that. "But it all started with Marcus. Marcus was the instigator of Project Renatus."

"How do you know that?"

"My father, Conroy, told me."

"Your father?"

"I suppose you could say he's *my* adopted father. He's obviously not my biological one."

Raven crossed his arms. "How do you know he's not lying?"

I pictured the rainbow cloud that swirled around Father's shoulders. Then I thought about Marcus' black one. "I just know."

"But you could be wrong. It's his word against my dad's."

"That's where you're wrong. I see auras around people. That's the ability I got from the drugs. It tells me how good a person's soul is. Marcus' cloud is black. Conroy's isn't. Trust me, your dad killed those kids without a second thought."

"*No*, he wouldn't do that!"

I held up my hands. "I'm not making this up."

"But you could be wrong."

“But I’m not.” I told him about my earliest memories of Marcus, about the way he drugged me and was so cruel. “His cloud is black, Raven. That’s as bad as they get. I know it’s hard to believe all of this, but it’s true.”

“Cloud?” he replied. “Is that what you call the things you see?”

I nodded. “Marcus has a black cloud—his aura is black. His soul is evil.”

Raven frowned and gritted his teeth. A few minutes passed. I let him take the time to process what I’d said, not trying to push him.

He shook his head, his jaw set. “But he’s never done anything like that to me!”

“How do you know that? He might have when you were younger. You may not remember it.”

“He didn’t.”

I didn’t know how to argue with that one.

“And he *is* still my dad,” Raven added.

I frowned contemplatively. I now understood why Raven had been helping Marcus keep me prisoner. He felt loyal to Marcus. “Is he a good father?” I couldn’t imagine Marcus being a *good* anything, but Raven obviously didn’t hate him.

Raven shrugged. “I guess. I mean, he’s never been loving or affectionate, and half the time he doesn’t seem to care that I exist, but he’s never hurt me.”

“Even when he drugged you?”

Raven’s eyes flashed brighter. “He’s *never* drugged me.”

“Yes, he has. How do you think you got your fire starting ability?”

“I don’t know. I’ve always had it. My dad said I have a genetic fluke, that I was born this way.”

I snorted. Genetic *fluke*? *Born* that way? That was the lie of all lies. We’d all been born normal children without these abilities. I’d buy that Raven didn’t remember being drugged. None of us remembered it. We’d all been too young for that, but I *did* remember the drugs that came after it, the ones that didn’t create our gifts but were additional drugs that Marcus was testing to see their effects. Luckily, the ones he’d given me weren’t mind altering, but I’d been a lucky one. Some of those drugs had killed other lost children.

“So you’ve lived with Marcus your entire life and never knew what he really did?”

"*If* he did those things," Raven growled.

"And you never knew about any of us, until recently?"

"Yeah. After that explosion last month, he sat me down and told me there were other people like me, people who could do special things. He said he wanted to help you all."

I almost choked. I couldn't imagine Marcus helping anyone. "Why would he tell you about us now?" It seemed as though it would make more sense to keep lying to Raven.

Raven ducked his chin. "He said he may need my help."

"Your help in what?"

He looked embarrassed again. "Uh, in capturing you guys."

My eyes went so wide they felt like saucers. "And you didn't see anything unusual about that?"

"He said you'd been brainwashed by a guy named Conroy. He wanted to help you and said the only way he could do that was to take you by force."

Anger strummed through me again. The only one who'd been brain washed was Raven, but he obviously didn't know that.

"What other details did he tell you about us?"

"That he'd known you once, before Conroy took you and brainwashed you. My dad said he's been looking for you ever since."

"And you didn't find anything strange about that? That he'd lied to you your entire life about not being alone? And that we'd all been taken, from *him?"*

Raven's irises glowed brightly again. The fire that still burned in the corner abruptly grew a foot. "But *why* would he experiment on all of you and not me?"

"I'm not sure why Marcus hasn't done to you what he's done to us, or why he raised you in secret, and I have no idea why he raised you as his son."

"See? You could be wrong."

I groaned. "Will you at least consider what I've told you?"

He stared at me, his face unreadable.

I shifted on the cold floor. My bottom was numb. "Were you there last night? At Marin Headlands?"

"Yeah, I was there."

My heart leaped. "Do you know what happened to everyone?"

Raven frowned. He looked regretful. “No.”

“So you don’t know if they’re okay? Or if they all got away? Or what happened during the fight?”

“I saw one guy turn into a wolf. That must be, what did you say his name was? Luke?”

I nodded. “Yeah, he’s one of the three we rescued the other week.”

“Right.” He frowned.

The delay in information almost killed me. “What about everyone else?”

“Another one, he seemed unstoppable. No matter how many men jumped on him, he flung them off like annoying flies. He went crazy when he realized we took you. We left shortly after that, as soon as we knew we couldn’t stop him or catch anyone else.”

I stopped breathing. “That was Flint.”

“The guy you claim is my brother?”

“Yes.”

“And the others? What happened to them?”

Raven shook his head. “I don’t know, but I do know we didn’t kill anyone if that’s what you’re worried about. We left as soon as we had you. It became apparent, with the wolf and how strong uh . . . Flint was, we wouldn’t be able to capture anyone else. One person ran, and two people in ski masks, I think they were guys from their builds, were fighting like normal humans.”

“That would be Jet and Jasper.” *And Di ran. Good, she got away.* “What about three other women? Mica, Jacinda and Amber? Did you see them?”

Raven shook his head. “It was hard to tell since it was nighttime and all of you were dressed in black and most wearing ski masks, but if I remember right, there were just four guys and one woman, but the woman fled before I could see her.”

“That was Di, your sister. She was probably going to Jacinda, Mica and Amber. They were at a different location.”

Raven gave me a curious look. “Aren’t you worried I’ll tell my dad all of this?”

My eyes widened again. I wanted to kick myself. *How could I have been so stupid?*

“I won’t tell him,” Raven said quietly.

“You won’t?”

“No. I, uh, need to think about all of this before I say anything.”

“Please don’t tell him.”

A long, heavy silence followed. I could tell from his brooding expression that he was trying to process everything. I glanced at the fire in the corner of the room. It had returned to a small ball. It flickered a few inches above the floor. I could feel its warmth, but what amazed me most of all was that it burned when it wasn’t burning anything. Usually, a fire burned wood or was supplied by gas or something that fed it, but Raven’s fires seemed to appear out of thin air. And unlike the rest of us, he didn’t seem to get tired or struggle to use his power.

“How do you do that?” I pointed to the flames. “Make a fire from nothing?”

His contemplative expression evaporated. “Oh . . . um, I don’t know. I’ve been making fires like that since I was a kid.”

“How big can you make them?”

The fire abruptly shot to the ceiling and quadrupled in diameter. I yelped and pulled back. The flames receded to the previous tiny fire. It supplied just enough light for us to see each other.

“It’s that easy for you?”

He nodded. “It’s like breathing. I don’t have to think about it.”

“Wow.”

“What about you?” he asked hesitantly. “You said you see auras, or clouds or whatever, but you can do more than just that?”

I nodded and tried to switch my vision. Once again, it didn’t click. Whatever drug Marcus gave me was blocking the receptors I needed to access the dormant part of my brain.

“Normally, I can see clouds around people, when I’m not being drugged.” Since Marcus already knew about my ability, I figured it didn’t matter if I told Raven. “Clouds are like a fog that hangs around a person’s shoulders and ranges in colors from pure white to pitch black. The whiter a cloud, the kinder a person is, the darker, the eviler.”

“So your gift is in your mind?”

I nodded and explained my ability more. “Yeah, but it’s more than that. In the past few months, I’ve learned how to harness those clouds and turn them into energy balls. They can be quite powerful.”

“So that’s what he was talking about,” Raven muttered.

I gave him a questioning look.

"I overheard my dad talking to someone on speaker phone a week ago. He was talking about those security guys in that warehouse you blew up. The security guys had told him some unseen force had pushed them. And then my dad said something blasted him off his feet. My dad told that guy that the force must have come from you."

"Yeah, that was me."

Raven cocked his head. "How powerful can you make those balls?"

I gave him a few examples.

"Seriously? So that's why my dad wanted you. He said something about wanting to study you more."

A chill ran through me. So Marcus *did* intend to experiment on me. *Now the question is, what kind of experiments?*

"What are they like?" Raven asked abruptly.

"What are who like?"

"Um . . . Di and Flint."

I tried to shrug off the thought of Marcus studying me. "Ah . . . well, they're like you, in the little I've gotten to know you. They look just like you. You all have the same skin tone and similar facial features. All three of you are tall and from what I've seen, your mannerisms are similar. Marcus may deny you're related to them, but I'd bet my life that you are."

Raven didn't say anything. His face was expressionless. He finally said in a quiet voice, "Do you know who their parents were?"

I thought back to my childhood when Father had told us what he'd known about our parents. "They're dead now, I do know that, and if I remember right, your mother was a prostitute and drug addict, and your father was also an addict. Di was around eighteen months old and Flint was two and a half when they were taken." I frowned. "Do you think it's possible your mother had you later? And Marcus went back for you?"

Raven shrugged. From his expression, I could tell he still didn't believe Marcus had done the things I claimed. "How old are Di and Flint?"

"Di's twenty-three and Flint's twenty-four."

"I'm twenty-one," Raven said. "At least, if the birth date my dad told me is right."

"So you could have been born after they were taken, and that would make you and Di two years apart. But how does that make sense?" I tried to think about all of the possibilities that would explain how Father never

knew about Raven and how Raven never knew about us. Raven would have been born around the same time as me. We were the same age. Yet, he should have been in the warehouse with us if he was part of Project Renatus. It didn't add up.

A grating sound at the door interrupted everything. I leaped up. Raven extinguished the fire. The cell plunged into darkness.

"Good afternoon, Princess," a voice called as the lock turned. Dumber.

"Heath, I'm in here," Raven said when the door cracked.

Heath? The door opened wider and Dumber peered in. In the hallway lights, the jagged scar that slashed across his cheek looked even bigger than I remembered.

"What the hell are you doing in here?" Heath placed his hands on his hips and glared at Raven.

"My dad told me to get some information out of her."

My insides chilled. *Was I just set up? Did Raven only pretend to want to know about his siblings?*

"Oh." Heath shuffled his feet. "Are you done? I'm supposed to take her to the bathroom."

"I can do it."

Heath's eager expression disappeared. "But Marcus told me to do it."

A sick feeling ran through me. I wondered if by taking me to the bathroom, Heath would be joining me in there too.

Raven walked to the door. "I said, *I'll* do it."

Heath backed away, but I still caught the angry look he gave Raven before he turned and stalked down the hall.

Distrust oozed through me. "So all of this was a setup? Your dad sent you to talk to me?"

Raven's eyes widened. "What? No!" He shook his head. "Oh, I see, you think I set you up. No, my dad has no idea I'm here. I didn't lie to you, Lena. I had to tell Heath something to make him leave. If my dad knows I'm here, I could get in trouble."

I cursed inwardly that I couldn't see his cloud. I was so used to being able to gauge people's intentions and sincerity with my ability. Without it, I felt lost.

"Trust me, Lena. Please." His eyes swirled bright orange again. His pleading look seemed sincere.

But is it?

“Who the hell are those two?” I nodded in the direction Heath had gone.

Raven shrugged. “Just two guys my dad has on his security team. They normally guard our house, but when my dad goes off on work excursions, they go with him.”

“Where are the rest of them?” I’d distinctly felt ten clouds yesterday at the Headlands.

“They’re looking for, um, you know, Flint and Di and everyone else.”

My stomach clenched.

“Don’t worry. They haven’t found them.”

I met his gaze. “If you’re lying to me . . .”

“I’m not.” His tone softened, and he looked down, shuffling his feet. “I’m nothing like who you claim my dad is. I would never hurt anybody intentionally.”

His words and expression reminded me of Flint. Honor ran so deeply through Flint. It was embedded in his core. Perhaps Raven was the same.

Raven’s look turned apologetic. “I need to handcuff you. If Heath or Trevor see me walking you around here without cuffs, they’ll tell my dad.”

I turned and let him cuff me. I briefly wondered how anyone could believe their dad wasn’t evil when he operated a building to hold kidnapped people and required handcuffing those people when moving them. The power of denial was apparently quite . . . well, powerful.

Once I was restrained, Raven prodded me gently ahead of him. My stomach tightened when I saw Trevor and Heath standing at the end of the hall, beside the bathroom.

“Hi, Red.” Trevor leered.

When they blocked the door to the bathroom, Raven stepped in front of me. “Do you two need something?”

“Marcus said she needs to bathe after the bathroom and we’re supposed to give her some clean clothes. Heath and I were talking about how hard it would be to shower with her hands tied behind her back, so we were thinking we’d help her.” Trevor waggled his eyebrows.

The sick feeling inside me grew.

“You two aren’t needed.” Raven put his hands on his hips. “If I stay with her, she won’t need to be handcuffed, and she can shower on her own.”

Trevor’s mouth dropped, his blue eyes narrowing. “What the hell, man? It’s our job to watch her.”

A small fire erupted at Trevor’s feet. He yelped and jumped back. The fire went out.

“Pretty sure I can handle her just fine on my own.”

“I told you,” Heath muttered under his breath to Trevor.

Trevor gave Raven a murderous look. “Let’s go.” The two of them stalked away. When they disappeared, I slumped in relief.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me yet. Once my dad finds out I’ve been giving you special treatment, he’s going to have a lot of questions.”

I thought about Marcus’ reaction to what I was saying this morning about Di and Flint being related to Raven. Once he found out I’d been talking to Raven in private, I’d be surprised if I ever saw the fire-starter again.

LUCKILY, RAVEN WAS able to help me use everything in private. After I finished in the bathroom, he led me to a locker room. It was entirely concrete as was everything in the hanger. There were no private shower stalls. Instead, there was a wall of shower heads in a large open space. Raven, however, kept his back turned the entire time and took the restraints off my wrists which allowed me to move freely.

With frenzied movements, I searched the shower stalls as discreetly as possible for something, *anything*, that I could use as a weapon. Similar to every other room in this hanger, there was nothing. Slumping in defeat, I finished and grabbed the clothes he’d brought in.

The new clothes fit surprisingly well. They were simple jeans and a sweater. Both had generic labels and felt a bit scratchy. I’d bet money they were picked up at the closest Walmart or Kmart. In a way, I would have preferred to put my own clothes back on, even though I’d been wearing them for two days, but at least they were mine and were comfortable. There was something sinister about having been here long enough that Marcus felt I warranted bathing and clean clothes.

As I pushed the sleeves of the sweater up my forearms, my tattoo flashed in the light. A sudden feeling of despair hit me. It had been almost sixteen hours since I’d left Flint and there was no sign of me getting out of here. If my family had been able to track me, wouldn’t they have rescued me by now?

I thought about how long it took me to wake up this morning after Marcus drugged me. Four hours. If that was the same drug I'd been given last night, that meant I'd spent almost four hours traveling in that van. My heart sank even further. I was most likely hundreds of miles from San Francisco.

Under the clothes was a pair of soft canvas slip-ons. I pulled on a pair of cotton socks and frowned at the canvas shoes. "Where'd my boots go?" When Raven didn't respond, I added. "I'm dressed. You can turn around now."

He turned slowly, his look apologetic. "Trevor was pretty pissed off when you kicked him. He told my dad about it, so my dad said we were to remove your boots."

"What'd you do with them?"

"I threw them away."

It was silly, but I wanted to cry. Without being able to form energy balls, the only defense I had was those boots. If Trevor or Heath came for me, I didn't stand a chance defending myself now.

"I'm sorry, but you won't need to worry about Trevor or Heath."

It was as if he read my mind. "Why not?"

He held up his phone. "Because I got a message from my dad when you were showering. We're leaving tonight."

"You're moving me?" My despair grew. If I moved to another location, the chances of Luke or Amber tracking me all but disappeared. Any chance or hope I had of being rescued would be gone. "Where are you taking me?"

"Back to Chicago. We'll leave after supper. The jet should be here by then."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The rest of the afternoon I lay in my cell, waiting for the inevitable. Once I was back in Chicago, who knew what fortress Marcus would lock me in. Any chance I had of seeing my family would disappear like snow on a hot July day.

Raven had been nice enough to leave a fire burning in my cell. It provided light and warmth. Once again I marveled at his ability. His fires *literally* burned. I'd learned that by getting a little too close when I'd been curious. My fingertip was still red. As for how long his fire would burn, I had no idea. Perhaps indefinitely unless he stopped it.

A part of me wondered if Raven started an entire city on fire and didn't put it out, would that mean that area of land would burn eternally? Or perhaps his fires could be extinguished with water. I wasn't sure about that either since they weren't *normal* fires. After all, they didn't burn anything. He started them from thin air. If Raven was back with us in Arizona or at the cabin in the Rockies, we could test all sorts of things with his ability.

That thought made my heart clench. I squeezed my eyes shut and leaned against the cold wall drawing my knees to my chest. The cabin. My family. Home.

Flint.

I missed him so much it actually hurt. It was hard to believe not even forty-eight hours ago, we'd been dining and shopping, strolling hand in hand along the streets of San Francisco. Now, that felt like years ago.

I'd tried not to think about him. Every time I did, an aching pain formed in my chest. I could only imagine how he felt right now. If roles were reversed, and he was taken by Marcus and I had no idea where he was or what was being done to him, I'd probably die from worry. Given Flint's obsessive worry over me, I hoped Di had something on hand to keep him subdued.

I took a deep breath and tried to push everything from my mind. I'd make myself sick if I kept thinking about it.

Getting up, I paced a few widths of the small area. I had no idea when they'd come for me. Since I didn't have a watch or any windows to gauge the sun, I'd completely lost track of time. Raven had put me back in here after my shower and lunch. He said he'd come back tonight. As for how long it had been since then, I had no idea. It felt like days. With nothing but the fire to stare at, and my thoughts for company, time became an undefinable dimension.

I closed my eyes and sank against the wall again.

HOURS LATER, A key slid into the lock. I tensed. The fire died as soon as the door opened. Raven stood alone in the hall.

I shakily pushed to standing. "I wondered when that fire would go out."

"That's why I'm here. If Trevor or Heath saw that, it would be one more thing they'd tell my dad."

"So he doesn't know that you and I were talking this morning?"

Raven shook his head. "Not yet."

"Oh . . . well, thanks for leaving the fire."

He shuffled his feet. "Sure. No problem."

In the hall lights, with that solemn look and his hair curling at the ends, he looked so much like Flint, an ache once again pained my chest. *Will I ever see Flint again?*

"Are you ready?" Raven asked.

I cleared my throat, thick with emotion, and tried to smile. "Is that a rhetorical question?"

With a shrug, he held up the handcuffs. His fire-lit eyes spoke volumes. They almost pleaded with me to not be mad at him.

"Is that really necessary?"

"I have to. Sorry."

I debated trying to push past him. He seemed to sense my intentions, though. A small fire erupted behind him.

Sighing, I turned.

Raven cuffed my wrists and led me down the hall. He stopped at the bathroom. "We won't get to Chicago till after midnight. This is probably your only chance to go between now and then." He took off the handcuffs.

I stared blankly at him and rubbed my wrists. *This is really happening. I'm really going to Chicago, and I don't know if I'll ever see my family*

again.

"What's your dad going to do with me?"

"I don't know, but I'm sure it won't be bad. You really don't need to worry."

Won't be bad. Raven still didn't believe me about Marcus. But I knew better. I knew whatever Marcus wanted me for—it wasn't good. I had to escape. It was now or never.

"What if you let me go?" I took a step closer to him. Desperation made me want to grasp his shirt and shake sense into him. "You could tell your dad that I broke free somehow. Say that I got my powers back and that I knocked you out!"

Unease settled on his face. "I really don't think he'll hurt you . . . Whatever his plan is, he really does want the best for you and your family."

I groaned in frustration. "Didn't you listen to *anything* I told you?"

His expression didn't falter. Not even a flash of doubt.

"Please, Raven. Please! If you don't help me, no one will."

"I . . . uh . . ." He took a step back.

My eyes darted to the end of the hall.

Before he said another word, I took off at a sprint. His shout followed. I didn't stop. My canvas shoes slapped against the pavement as the end of the hallway neared. My world became that door.

I need to get through it! Get outside. Flag someone down. Draw attention to yourself.

The door neared.

Four yards.

I grinned.

Three yards!

My smile grew.

A wall of fire erupted inches from my escape route.

I skidded to a stop as heat licked my face. Footsteps pounded behind me. Other voices reached my ears. Snickers and a chuckle.

"Where ya going, Red?"

The voice was closing in. I frantically assessed the fire. *I could run through it. I might get seriously burned, but I may survive. This may be my only chance!*

I bent my knees, ready to jump when a hand clamped around my bicep. Fingers dug into me. "Need a hand with her, Raven? Looks like she

almost got away.” Trevor’s taunt filled the hall.

I screamed and pulled my hand back to rake my fingernails across his face. Heath grabbed my other arm as I flailed and kicked.

“Where are those handcuffs, Raven?” Heath’s thick hot fingers clamped tightly around my wrist.

Raven stood a yard away. His jaw clenched. “Let her go.”

“And what? Let her escape? Give her a chance to use those little cat claws on me?” Trevor chuckled. “No thanks. Give me the cuffs.”

Raven reluctantly handed them over. His eyes pleaded with me. “My dad’s not going to hurt you, Lena. You’ll see.”

I blinked back tears. Heath and Trevor both had laughter in their eyes.

Raven gritted his teeth. “Go easy on her.”

Trevor and Heath chuckled as they tightened the cuffs painfully around my wrists. When finished, Raven shoved them aside and gently pulled me forward.

“You should use the bathroom,” he said quietly. “It’s a long plane ride.”

When I finished in the restroom, I followed Raven through the carpeted oasis. Trevor and Heath trailed us. It didn’t stop me from assessing everything as I desperately sought another way out.

There was nothing.

We exited through the door by the bookshelf again, and on the way to the end of the next concrete hallway, we passed the room where Marcus had drugged me this morning. *If only I could form energy balls!*

I tried for the hundredth time to switch my vision.

Nothing happened.

I counted the hours since my last dose. It was right after breakfast this morning, so around twelve hours. Twelve more hours before it left my system. As another door loomed at the end of the hall, I knew the only chance I had was getting my ability back.

Without it, I didn’t stand a chance.

As Raven led me through the last door, I was so caught up in brainstorming ways to prevent my next dose, that it wasn’t until a blast of cold air hit me that I realized we’d gone outside. Startled, I looked up. It was nighttime. A dark limousine waited. I quickly scanned my surroundings and tried to figure out where we were.

The rear exit of the hanger opened to a dark alleyway. A large fence lined the back of it. The alleyway seemed to travel forever. Rows and rows of industrial buildings stretched down the narrow street. On the other side of the fence, towering trees swayed menacingly above. There were no street signs or landmarks. It could be any alleyway in the United States.

Wherever it was, it was deserted. Not a soul to be seen.

I stiffened when the limousine door opened. Marcus peered up at me from within. “Good evening, Galena. Please, get in.”

Raven’s hands tightened on my biceps.

Trevor and Heath brushed up against me. Heath’s hand drifted to my hip. Raven pulled me away from them. His swirling eyes gave Heath and Trevor hard looks.

I stiffened, my eyes darting around, desperately seeking some way to escape.

“Don’t,” Raven whispered. “You know you can’t get away. You’re just making it worse. Please, it’ll be all right.”

Hearing those words made the fight go out of me. My shoulders sank so low, it felt as if I’d fall through the pavement. Despite what I’d told Raven, he was still loyal to Marcus. *Did you really think it would be any other way?* He met me twenty-four hours ago. It was foolish to think he’d let me escape.

Raven ducked my head as I sank into the limo before he, Trevor and Heath climbed in after me.

THE RIDE TO the airport was long. Marcus kept me blindfolded. I didn’t know why. It’s not as if I was in communication with anyone and could tell them where I was. The only reason I could fathom for *why* he’d blindfolded me was so I couldn’t identify where the hanger was located. If I’d been able to watch through the window as we left, I might have caught a glimpse of a street sign or a memorable building. Perhaps he was worried that I’d eventually get away and relay that information to Father or the police. Knowing that was probably his concern helped me feel a little better. If he thought I could escape then maybe I could.

Marcus removed the blindfold when we turned onto a smooth road. I anxiously looked around. We were at a large airport but away from the commercial section.

“You’re certainly quiet tonight,” Marcus said when the limo pulled up to a jet waiting at the landing strip. He opened the door, stepped out and actually held his hand out to me.

I ignored it and stepped onto the tarmac. Cold wind blew around us. I shivered and wished I could wrap my arms around myself. I figured we’d gone inland from San Francisco. Without the ocean to moderate the temperature, it was colder here. The sweater they’d given me did little to stop the biting wind.

My heart lodged in my throat. The last time I’d been cold from not having a jacket, Flint and I had strolled hand in hand down a San Francisco street—talking, laughing, holding hands as love strummed between us.

Marcus still looked at me as if waiting for a reply.

I cleared my throat. “And what would you be like in my situation?” Curls blew around my face.

Marcus’ cold gaze assessed me. In the night, he reminded me of Count Dracula. Tall and sinister looking, he had a dead look to his gaze, as if his soul had died long ago.

“Touché,” he replied dryly.

Raven hung back a few feet as Marcus gripped my arm and pulled me to the jet. I dragged my feet. His grip tightened painfully.

Distant sounds of planes taking off came from the runway. I desperately looked around for someone to help me. I didn’t see anybody, but I opened my mouth to scream anyway.

Something plunged into my neck before my scream came out. *No!* The drug swept through my system so fast I fell to the ground before taking another step.

I DIDN’T REMEMBER much of the plane ride or landing in Chicago. The entire journey was one hazy blur.

I also didn’t know what Marcus drugged me with. It felt like a sedative of some kind but didn’t knock me out completely. I’d briefly wake to hear voices and see foggy images of Heath, Trevor, Marcus and Raven sitting in the plane, but then everything would go black again. The few times my brain worked enough to understand what was happening, I fought to stay awake. Each time, I fell under again, drifting off to a deep, dreamless sleep.

It wasn’t until sometime the next day, or so I assumed from the bright sunlight that pierced my eyelids, that the sedative wore off completely.

When I woke enough to understand actual *sunlight* was visible, I bolted upright. My head spun.

The first thing I noticed after my head stopped spinning was the feel of satiny soft sheets. I was in a king sized bed surrounded by pillows in a huge bedroom. Sunlight streamed in through several large windows. Gauzy curtains framed the impressive panes.

“What the hell?” Nobody else was in the room.

I sprang out of bed despite my pounding head and raced to a window. A wave of nausea swept through me. I almost doubled over on my sprint across the carpet. I stared down at my bare feet as I gripped my knees. *Wait, bare feet?*

I still wore the same pants and T-shirt from the hanger, but the scratchy sweater was nowhere to be seen. I spotted the canvas shoes by the door just as bile rose in my throat. Instead of continuing to the window, I scanned the room for a bathroom. An open door stood in the corner. I spied a sink. Racing toward it, I barely made it to the toilet before I threw up the pitiful amount of frothy stomach contents. My head pounded even harder.

What the hell did they do to me?

I sank to the bathroom floor. Cold tiles made goosebumps rise along my thighs. Between my rolling stomach and pounding head, I didn’t know which was worse. That someone had transported me across the country while I was unconscious, or that they’d drugged me so much that the side effects were making me feel at death’s door.

After a few minutes, I finally felt like I could stand without retching again. Pulling myself up to the sink basin, I stared in disbelief at the mirror. Hollowed cheeks, bloodshot eyes, and pale lips stared back at me. My face was so white, I looked like a ghost. Even my hair looked sick.

I turned on the tap and leaned forward. My throat was so dry, it felt as if it cracked when I gulped down mouthful after mouthful of cold water. I drank for so long, a kink formed in my neck from the awkward position.

I finally turned the faucet off and listened for sounds. Nothing but a slight hum from the HVAC reached my ears.

Creeping out of the bathroom, I scanned the room, looking for cameras. I didn’t see any. That meant this was either a normal bedroom or they were hidden somewhere. I raced to the door and wrenched the handle.

It was locked.

I tried it again and again and screamed in frustration. When it became apparent no amount of raging would work, I raced across the thick carpet to the window, wincing again when my head pounded.

This room was high up, at least two, maybe three stories. It appeared I was in a mansion. The window revealed an impressive backyard. Acres of grass butted up to a thick forest. The grass was brown, obviously dormant for the winter, and the trees were bare. I didn't see any other houses or people. It was beautiful, but no signs of life were anywhere.

I ran my fingers along the window, searching for a way to open it. There were no locks. They were solid panes, not meant to open. Surveying the rest of the room, I barely registered the elegant fireplace and couches around it. A large wardrobe stood in the corner. Expensive looking artwork hung on the walls.

I needed something heavy. Something I could lift. The wardrobe and couches were obviously out.

Two, dark wood nightstands stood beside the large bed. I raced to one. With more effort than it normally would have taken, I awkwardly lifted it. My stomach rolled again, but I swallowed down the bile.

I carried the table to the window and gripped it tightly before hurling it at the glass with as much force as I could muster. I expected it to crash through the window, or at the very least, crack it.

All it did was bounce off and land with a thud on the floor. To show for my efforts, there was now a crack in the wood baseboard.

"I wouldn't bother trying that again."

I whirled around. Raven stood by the door. He quickly closed it before I could see where it led.

"They're bulletproof," he explained. "No way in, and no way out."

Murderous rage boiled through me. I flew at him.

He caught me in his arms but let me pummel his chest anyway. Snarls came from me that didn't sound human. "How could you!" I screamed. "How could you let him do this to me!"

Raven stood silently, letting me hit him. I screamed at him and took my rage out on his chest. He didn't try to stop me. When I realized he had no intention of defending himself, the fight went out of me. I slumped to the floor.

Raven didn't do this to me. Marcus did.

Tears poured down my face as bone-deep desperation took hold of me. It felt as if it would swallow me whole. This was real. I was truly a prisoner, and there was no chance of me escaping.

Raven lowered himself to sit beside me. He awkwardly patted my shoulder. His sad, ember filled eyes and lack of words spoke volumes. He liked me, but he wasn't going to help me.

"Why?" I looked up at him. He was blurred through my tears. "Why won't you help me?"

"He's my *dad*, Lena. I can't betray him."

"If you had a dad, and you *knew* he was a serial killer, would you really turn the other cheek and let him go on killing?"

"It's not like that, he wouldn't—"

"Yes, he would! He already has!"

Raven flinched.

The silence stretched again, but I could tell Raven's mind was made up. He was Marcus' son, end of story. "Where are we?"

"Um . . . our house. This is where I grew up." Raven raked a hand through his hair, his movements so familiar an ache formed in my chest.

I smiled humorously. "Flint runs his hands through his hair too, when he's worried."

"What?" He looked startled.

I pointed at his head. His hair stood up on all ends as though he'd been running his hands through it repeatedly. "Flint does the same thing when he's stressed."

"Oh." He glanced down. "Right."

Another long moment of silence passed.

"Don't you want to meet them? You have a brother and sister."

"Um, well . . . my dad said that's not true. He said it's just a coincidence that they look like me."

My eyes bulged. "You *told* him what I said? You promised you wouldn't!"

"No, I didn't tell him, not really. Just that you said they were my brother and sister and I was curious about it. But it wasn't anything you hadn't said to him already, at breakfast yesterday."

"And you believe him over me."

"It all *could* be a coincidence, Lena. A lot of people look the same."

“And have the same mannerisms? Similar personalities? And a link to a genetic researcher? The same researcher that took all of us from our birth parents when we were babies? Yeah, you’re right, *definitely* a coincidence. Makes complete sense. There’s no way you’re related to them.”

His face clouded over.

“They’re your brother and sister, Raven.” I sighed. “Whether you want to accept it or not, they are.”

He took a deep breath and stood. “Are you hungry?”

“Does it matter if I am?”

“I’ll bring up a tray for you.” With that, he turned and walked out the door. The key turned in the lock.

I buried my head in my hands.

Nothing had changed, except instead of being kept in a cold, concrete cell, I’d been moved to a gilded cage. The room was beautiful, the furniture and decorations immaculate, the view breathtaking, but it was still a cage, and I was forever its prisoner.

THREE FULL DAYS passed with nobody coming into my room except for Raven, and of course Marcus when he administered my daily drug. I spent most of my time trying to find a way out. I’d emptied every drawer in the desk and wardrobe, rummaged through every cabinet in the bathroom, and tried everything short of pulling the bed apart to find *something* that would help me breakout. But it didn’t matter. Regardless of how much I tried, I couldn’t find a tool or piece of metal to pick the door’s lock. I knew the lock wasn’t foolproof. I simply didn’t have the means necessary to breakout.

Knowing that made me want to scream.

Each day when Marcus visited, I expected him to wheel me away to some secretive basement lab and begin his Frankenstein experiments on me. But each day, he smiled, asked me mundane, small talk questions, and then administered my daily dose before leaving.

I couldn’t understand Marcus’ angle. Perhaps he was buttering me up for something. He’d said when we first met that he had much to offer me. *Does he actually expect me to believe that?* If I knew one thing, it was that Marcus only served one person: himself.

I’d asked Raven on that first day, after my meltdown when he’d returned with lunch, why Marcus still allowed him to see me. Apparently,

his “dad” felt confident his only son would never betray him. It almost seemed as if Marcus nominated Raven as my caretaker because Marcus *knew* that trusting Raven would solidify his adopted son’s loyalty. Just like Flint, a sense of honor ran deep in Raven’s core.

It seemed Marcus knew that too.

With each hour and day that passed, I became more and more convinced that I’d never see my family again. I spent most of my time pacing the room. There was a TV, but it did little to help me feel connected with anyone. I only turned it on when I wanted to know what time it was. Beyond that, all it did was remind me it was my only connection to the outside world.

As day five began, I knew that a rescue was never coming. Since no one in my family had attempted to rescue me at Marcus’ hanger in California that meant they hadn’t known where I was. I had hoped Amber and Luke’s tracking abilities would have been able to find me, but either we left too quickly from the hanger, or their skills didn’t extend to wherever Marcus held me. And now that we were in Chicago, or somewhere close to it, the chances of them finding me were next to none.

That only left two options since the option of Raven helping me was no longer a possibility.

One, I either acquiesced and accepted Marcus was my captor for the rest of my life, or two, I found a way to get out on my own.

Raven had just brought me lunch. I sat on the couch, picking at it. My appetite had all but disappeared.

I eyed the designer jeans I wore in disgust. They were a symbol of Marcus’ immense wealth and control. In the humongous wardrobe, hung an array of clothes, all in my size. Marcus had obviously planned for my capture. I wondered if there were other rooms in his mansion that were set up for my brothers and sisters. Perhaps there was a room somewhere with jeans and sweatshirts in Flint’s size, just waiting for him to occupy it.

A fierce determination bloomed in me. I wouldn’t let him capture anyone else in my family. I’d find a way out.

Now, it was just a matter of how.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The next time Marcus administered my drug, I watched him meticulously. I needed my power back to stand any chance of escape, which meant I needed to find a way to avoid a dose. Just one dose and I'd be able to breakout.

Each time Marcus gave me his drug, he used a small vein in my arm. Raven would hold me down so I couldn't fight. To make it worse, Marcus always waited for a blood return before he injected the dose. That guaranteed he got the drug in my system. The oily feeling swam through my circulation shortly afterward, and I'd pass out within a minute.

I knew Marcus had a lot of practice giving this drug. He'd kept Susannah, Edgar and Luke subdued for years with it. Granted, he obviously didn't administer it himself every day, but I wouldn't have been surprised if he'd had extensive training in phlebotomy. His technique was flawless.

So what can I do to avoid one dose?

I knew enough about medicine, from years of listening to Father and Di, that the drug needed to be injected into my bloodstream for it to work. If the needle slipped from the vein and the drug went into the surrounding tissues, the drug wouldn't be in circulation. Therefore, it wouldn't work.

In other words, I needed to find a way to have the needle come out of my vein while Marcus was injecting the drug without Marcus realizing it.

I began to plan.

THE NEXT MORNING, just after I showered and dressed, Marcus and Raven knocked on my bedroom door. Such manners. I once said I was busy, just to see what they'd do. They entered anyway.

The key in the lock always sounded before they both walked in. With them came a draft from the hall. I tried to peek over their shoulders each time, but as always, all I was awarded with was a glimpse of windows and a carpeted hallway. Not much for details.

Nobody but them ever entered my room. I wondered if anyone else knew I was here. I had no idea if Marcus had staff. Perhaps he had a

housekeeper who questioned why this bedroom door was always locked and closed. Or perhaps not.

No one cleaned that I knew of. I never heard voices in the hall, sounds of vacuums being run or radios being played. Wherever I was kept in this mansion was most likely off limits to anyone else.

I watched Marcus warily as he stepped into the room.

“Good morning, Galena.” He smiled. Those gray eyes were cold, as they always were. His hair was expertly styled, his face clean shaven. A hint of expensive cologne wafted around him. Utter perfection oozed from his persona, yet that pristine beauty contained a heart of evil.

He wore pressed slacks, a dress shirt and tie. I’d never seen him without a tie. I had no idea if that dress decorum was required at O’Brien Pharmaceuticals. Or perhaps he was merely corporate now—no longer delving into the labs like Father still did.

“Did you sleep well?”

“Never better,” I replied sarcastically. I hoped my sarcasm hid my nerves. My palms sweat so badly at what I needed to do this morning.

Marcus either chose to ignore my sarcasm or didn’t pick up on it.

Raven entered behind his dad. He kept his eyes averted. He always did, as if not looking at me and avoiding the pain on my face meant he wasn’t really doing anything wrong.

“Come, have a seat.” Marcus sat on the sofa by the fire.

“I’m fine here.” I stood rooted by the bed.

Marcus reached into the small bag he always carried. From it, he withdrew a syringe and vial. Without looking at me, he began to draw up the medication. “Tomorrow, we’ll be going to the lab.”

My heart stopped. “What?”

“I’ve given you enough time to adjust to your new life. It’s time to continue with our studies. If you cooperate, it’ll work to your advantage.”

I whipped my gaze to Raven, but he was half turned and seemed to be studying a very fascinating speck of lint on a pillow.

“What are you going to do to me?”

“Nothing you need to be concerned about.”

Anger bubbled up in me. *Right, of course not. It’s only my life and my body, nothing for me to worry about.* I wanted to scream at him and tear that satisfied smile off his face, but I was powerless. Raven would stop me before I got within a foot of his dad.

“Now, have a seat.” Marcus patted the couch cushion beside him.

I swallowed tightly. This was it. It was now or never. If Marcus transported me to his lab, I’d be locked behind walls of concrete, perhaps underground. My energy balls couldn’t penetrate that regardless of whether or not I got off his drug.

It would truly be the end.

With stiff movements, I walked to the couch and sat. Raven seated himself beside me and hooked a leg over both of mine before gripping my wrists. The action held me immobile. The first time he’d done that, I’d fought, but then he’d formed a ring of fire around my head, inches from my face. That was enough to make me stop. The skin on my fingertip, that I’d burned back in the concrete cell after being curious about his power, had finally healed. Another thing I’d learned about Raven’s fire was that they burned deeper than a normal fire even if the burn seemed superficial. Skin didn’t heal quickly, and although I wasn’t vain, I preferred keeping my face intact.

My heart pounded harder as Marcus swabbed my skin with an alcohol wipe. The pungent smell filled my nose. He next wrapped an elastic band around my bicep. Taking the needle, Marcus flicked my skin a few times until he found a good vein.

I stopped breathing.

This was it.

If I couldn’t avoid this dose, I’d never be free.

The prick of the needle stung. I watched the metal slide under my skin. Marcus drew back. Crimson blood flushed into the syringe. He always found a vein on his first try. My eyes widened as he slowly began injecting the drug.

Now, Lena! Now!

“I think I might be pregnant!”

Marcus’ head whipped up, and Raven’s grip loosened. I moved my arm a fraction of an inch. I felt the needle move, but I didn’t know if it had pierced through the vein and gone into the surrounding tissues. I could only hope it had. If it hadn’t, the drug would continue being pushed into my circulation system.

“What?” Marcus hurriedly pushed the rest of the drug through before withdrawing the needle and slapping on a bandage. “You’re pregnant?” A hopeful gleam filled his eyes.

I tensed, pulling back. “Or not. I’ve lost track of my periods. I thought I should take a pregnancy test.”

Marcus nodded. “I’ll get you one.”

I waited for the oily feeling and unconsciousness that always came within seconds of the drug being administered. All I felt was a burning sensation in my arm. My heart pounded with hope, before a voice of reason spoke in my head. *You need to pass out!*

“S’okay,” I slurred. I closed my eyes and slumped against Raven. He gripped me tighter. If he hadn’t, I would have fallen to the floor.

A few sounds of the needle being thrown away and supplies being put back in Marcus’ bag filled the room. “Move her to the bed.”

I tried to keep my breathing deep and even. Staying limp was harder. I had to concentrate to not stiffen when Raven stood. His chest was hard against me. His heart pounded. It sounded like a galloping beast beside my ear. I had no idea if his anxiety was from worry, or perhaps his heart always pounded when he helped his dad.

Raven’s voice rumbled in his chest. “If she’s pregnant, shouldn’t you stop giving her the drug? Wouldn’t that be bad for the baby?”

A long silence passed as Raven stood there, holding me. I could only guess that he was staring at his father, waiting for a reply.

“I can never stop giving her this drug. The baby will be fine. If there’s a baby.” The excited tone in Marcus’ voice sickened me. *He wants me to be pregnant?*

“How do you know the baby will be fine?”

“I just do.”

Raven began walking. My dangling arm brushed against his rough jeans. He deposited me on the bed. The feel of a blanket brushed against my skin. He’d actually covered me so I wouldn’t be cold.

I wanted to sigh in frustration. Raven had a good soul. I knew his cloud would be white if he were a normal human. If only I could convince him to leave his dad.

Another moment of silence passed. I lay deathly still, yet my heart pounded. What I wouldn’t give to be a fly on the wall so I could see the facial expressions between the two.

“But you’ve never experimented on a pregnant woman, right?” Raven’s voice was pleading, almost as if he hoped his dad would never do something like that, but he wasn’t so sure anymore.

“Of course not, Raven,” Marcus said soothingly. “I told you. Lena and all of the others were born with horrible defects. I cured them. I would never hurt a pregnant woman.”

“Okay.” A hint of doubt shadowed Raven’s words.

If I didn’t have to pretend I was sleeping, I’d have told Marcus exactly what I thought about his ridiculous lies. We were never born with birth defects. We’d been normal children, in every sense of the word, just children born into horribly abusive families.

Was that the latest lie Marcus was telling Raven? That he’d *cured* us? Did he have to concoct lies every day to keep his son in line? Hope grew in me. *Maybe Raven’s beginning to have doubts about what his dad’s doing.*

They left shortly after that. I heard the door close and the lock sound. I continued to lay there. More than anything I wanted to jump up and dance in glee. The impulsive side of me itched to do it, but every other morning after they’d administered the drug, I’d been unconscious for three to four hours, usually waking just before lunch. That meant I had to lay here until then. I still didn’t know if there were hidden cameras in this room, and I wasn’t taking the chance.

I tamped my impulsiveness down. Glee still bubbled up in me, however. From the horrible burning in my arm, I knew the drug had settled into the interstitial tissues. I’d probably have reddened skin and burning for a while, maybe even some tissue damage, but I didn’t care. One way or another, I was breaking out of here tonight.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

I waited until Raven entered with my lunch before I got up. Talk about a long four hours. Not once did I open my eyes throughout the morning. I was too scared I'd give myself away. This was the last opportunity to take control of my life. No way was I going to blow it.

When Raven entered, I sat up in bed, rubbing my eyes. I did my best to act groggy. I could only hope he didn't hear my galloping heart or feel my barely controlled excitement.

Balancing the tray on his hand, Raven turned to close the door.

It's now or never. I closed my eyes and switched my vision.

It clicked.

I could almost feel the neurons firing as the dormant part of my brain once again activated. When I opened my eyes, my vision was altered.

A beautiful, glittery cloud surrounded Raven's shoulders. I stared in amazement. It was royal purple in color, but the glitter that shimmered in it was something I hadn't seen before. Trying to contain my curiosity, I studied it.

If I'd learned one thing about lost children's clouds, it was that they pulled me into a person's inner being, like a storyteller weaving a story. When I saw the average white, gray or black cloud, it told me how good a person's soul was, but when I saw colors, I knew I found a fragmented soul that had been broken and put back together.

Seeing the glittery quality in Raven's cloud only meant one thing.

Raven was unique.

Something had been done to him that hadn't been done to the rest of us.

All of my brothers and sisters had colored clouds. Each color represented a specific drug given to us that altered our brain chemistries, but those clouds were solid in color. It was the same for Luke, Edgar and Susannah. Those three had a multitude of colors, like Father, since so many drugs had been given to them, but none of them glittered.

Raven set my lunch tray beside the couch and gave me a worried look. His fire filled eyes always glowed a little brighter when he felt a strong emotion. I'd learned that the second day. Right now, his eyes practically glowed.

"How are you feeling?" Guilt laced his tone.

I swung my legs over the side of the bed. "Fine. I think."

I padded to his side and sat on the couch. The tray held a steaming bowl of chicken noodle soup, freshly cut up fruit and a sandwich. Simple but nutritious food. Comfort food.

"If you're more hungry than usual, I can bring you something else. Or if certain things make you nauseous, I can make something else entirely. Just let me know."

I raised my eyebrows.

"I did a little research while you were sleeping. It said pregnant women can find certain foods nauseating or unappealing. It also said it's not uncommon for women to lose weight in the first trimester if they feel particularly sick. So, if there's anything you need to feel more comfortable, just let me know."

I was so shocked that for a moment I didn't say anything. *Right. I said I was pregnant*. Or rather, that I *thought* I was as a distraction to get the needle out of my vein. I didn't actually believe I was pregnant, but they didn't know that. Tucking my hair behind my ears, I picked up the sandwich.

"Um, I'm okay right now, but thanks."

"I also brought you these." He handed me several foiled tube looking packets. "Dad said to use them next time you go to the bathroom and to give them back to me."

Two pregnancy tests sat in his palm. I hastily grabbed them and shoved them in my jean pocket. "Right, ah, thanks."

As I ate lunch, Raven's concern was a bit overwhelming. He hovered around me, plumping pillows to make sure I was comfortable, and quite frankly, acted like a doting mother hen. Once again, he reminded me so much of Flint that I wanted to cry. His older brother had acted the exact same way after Aaron attacked me back at Hideaway Hills ranch.

"Raven, it's okay." He tried to lift my cup for me to drink. "I'm not incapacitated. I might not even be pregnant."

He nodded and ran a hand harshly through his hair. “I hope you’re not.”

The anguish in his tone made me stiffen. I set the soup down. “Why? Did Marcus say what he’d do if I was pregnant?”

Raven wouldn’t meet my gaze.

Switching my vision, I felt comforted when his glittery, purple cloud appeared again. My ability was back in full force. Drawing up the energy inside me, I concentrated on joining my cloud with his. It happened readily. The power hummed within me, tethering Raven’s cloud to mine. Our swirling energies pulsed and grew. Looking out the window, I summoned the energy in the vast forest. It called to me. Its sheer power and greatness brought a humbling sense of relief. My weeks of practice in which I became more in-tuned to my ability and the clouds around others hadn’t disappeared. If anything, it had grown.

Within seconds, a powerful ball swirled within our midst.

I could almost taste it. Triumph made me grin. I was no longer helpless. I was no longer a mere, small woman who couldn’t take care of herself. Come nighttime, I’d be blasting a hole through Marcus’ house and wreaking as much destruction as needed to escape.

Raven raked a hand through his hair again. He stood and paced the room a few times.

I let the energy ball dissipate. “Is everything okay?” I pushed the tray away. Scents of the soup still lingered in the room.

“It’s just . . .” His movements became more agitated. His eyes glowed like fire, swirling and pulsing a reddish, orange color. “I’m starting to wonder if my dad’s telling me the truth about everything.”

I sat up straighter. “You are?”

“He told me he’d began the Project, um Project Renatus or whatever, to help children all over the world. He wanted to create a drug that would cure disabilities and birth defects, and I wanted to believe him. I *did* believe him when he told me that the other day, after I asked him why he wouldn’t let you go.” He ran a hand through his hair again. “But then I overheard him this morning. Talking to someone on the phone. He said . . .”

The silence stretched.

“He said *what?”*

“He said that he may ‘*have another subject’* that they could study. He was talking about you, Lena. He was saying that you may be pregnant. He

sounded so excited, and I heard something in his tone I haven't heard before. It, uh, well to be honest, it scared me."

I leaned forward. "And now you believe me about him?"

Raven stopped pacing and put his hands on his hips. With his mussed hair, olive skin and distraught expression, he once again reminded me of his brother. I could only imagine Flint's disbelief if he ever met Raven. The two were practically cookie cutter replicas in personality and looks. Although, Flint's hair was chestnut not black, and his personality was more guarded. I imagined spending his first eight years of life in O'Brien's warehouse could be blamed for that.

"Yeah, I guess you could say that." Raven glanced toward the window, a haunted expression in his swirling eyes. "This whole week, I've been trying to forget what you told me. My whole life I've grown up in this house with my dad. It's been just me, him and Cecile, our housekeeper. I've never gone to a normal school or had friends. My dad said, because of how I was born, that I'd never fit into the outside world. He said he needed to keep me hidden to protect me, but now I'm starting to wonder if it was to protect *him."*

He sank into the chair across from me and placed his head in his hands.

More than anything, I wanted to jump for joy and beg him to leave with me, but I knew he needed to come to his own conclusions. If he didn't make his decisions for himself, he may have regrets. Or worse, he may blame *me*.

"So what are you going to do?"

"I don't know." Raven shrugged. "But I don't feel good about what he and I are doing. I feel like I can't let him take you to that lab tomorrow. I've got a gut feeling that I may never see you again if he does."

I held my breath. I didn't dare tell him about tricking them into not giving me my dose this morning. I wanted to trust Raven, and in some ways I did, but I couldn't tell him I was breaking out tonight. He was only starting to doubt Marcus' sincerity. He still wasn't promising to help me and join the others.

"You'll always be welcome in our family, Raven. No matter what happens. No matter what decision you make, I want you to know that. Di, Flint, Conroy and everyone else, will welcome you with open arms. Even if I disappear tomorrow to your father's lab, you can still go to them."

I walked to the desk. From it, I withdrew a piece of paper and a pen. I wrote down Flint's telephone number. I knew I was taking a risk by doing this. It was possible, if Raven had second thoughts or went back into denial, that he'd give this number to his dad, but I couldn't leave tonight without giving him some way to contact us. If I didn't, he'd have no one to help him.

"Here." I handed it to him.

"What's this?"

"That's Flint's cell phone number. I'm trusting you. You can never let your dad have that. If he were to find a way to track that phone, my entire family would be at risk, but I think you deserve a chance to meet them if you decide you want to."

He took the paper and stared at it. His eyes glowed brighter. "I want to help you," he finally whispered. "I just don't know how. My dad has this place guarded so heavily. He'd catch me if I tried to help you escape."

My heart warmed. Just knowing he wanted to help was enough.

"Don't worry about me. I can take care of myself."

His expression said he didn't believe that.

"I've managed to handle myself just fine until now," I added. "No matter what happens, don't worry about me, but please consider calling Flint." I paused, trying to figure out a way to articulate my next words in a way that wouldn't put him off contacting his brother. "And Raven, if you call Flint, um . . . just know that he can be a bit gruff at times, especially where I'm concerned. But he has a good heart and he'll come around. Okay?"

His confused look made me add, "If he starts yelling, just ask for Di. She's the more reasonable one."

He nodded, his face wary. "Okay." He stood to leave. "I guess I better go. I'll be back tonight with your supper tray. I'll try talking to my dad again and will see if I can convince him to not move you to the lab."

"Thanks."

Before he turned, he pulled me into an awkward hug. "Thanks for everything, Lena. You're the first friend I've had."

A lump formed in my throat. "I'll always be your friend. Remember that. I don't blame you for what your dad's done."

He nodded but a blush stained his cheeks. He wouldn't meet my gaze. "See you later."

I watched him walk to the door. When he left, I noticed a strand of his dark hair on my shoulder. I held it up and studied it. After tonight, it was possible I'd never see him again.

I hoped more than anything that I was wrong.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

I waited until nighttime. The darker and later it was, the less chance I'd have of being caught, or so I hoped. Given I had no idea where I was in Illinois, or how far it was to the nearest town, it was possible I'd be walking for miles before finding a way to contact anyone in my family. And of course, that was only *if* I managed to breakout without being caught in the process.

Since there wasn't a clock in the room, I waited until the sky was completely black. After I'd been in bed for what I could only assume was a few hours, I got up and crept silently to the wardrobe.

I dressed in thick dark jeans, wool socks and a fitted long-sleeved shirt, then another long-sleeved shirt, a sweater over that and then a hooded sweatshirt. The sweatshirt was dark gray, not black as I would have preferred, but at least it wouldn't be easily spotted.

There wasn't a jacket, mittens, or a hat. The only shoes I had were the flimsy canvas ones from California. I cursed again that my boots had been taken. It was quite possible I'd freeze to death if I managed to escape. However, I knew layers were key. Growing up in the mountains had taught me that. The bulky attire made agile movements difficult, but I needed the warmth if I'd be walking or hiking all night.

I briefly thought about my homeless days. I'd spent so many nights freezing by the side of a road with nothing but my hope and determination for company.

If I could survive that, I could survive this.

Throughout the day, I'd contemplated the best way to get out of the mansion. There was the obvious one. I could blast a hole through the wall, jump on the roof and climb my way down. From there, I would run like a fire lit my tail until I reached some form of civilization. The downfall of that plan was that it drew attention. If this place was as heavily guarded as Raven said it was, Marcus' men would be in hot pursuit.

Because of that, I opted for a more evasive plan. It would require subtle use of my energy balls and more stealth, but my hope was no one would notice me missing until the morning.

When I was ready to go, I gave the room one last look around. The pregnancy tests sat unopened on the desk. A part of me had been curious to take one. After all, when Marcus captured me I hadn't had my birth control on me. I didn't know if that meant I could get pregnant or not since Flint and I had sex the night before my capture. Regardless, if I *was* pregnant, that information was not something I'd share with Marcus.

With a swift movement, I swept the pregnancy tests into the garbage can.

I crept toward the door, my feet sinking silently into the carpet. When I reached it, I listened for any sounds. Nothing. The entire house was eerily silent.

I summoned the energy within me. It hummed to life. Using that control, I pulled my cloud forward and off my body, disconnecting it from my shoulders. Concentrating, I formed my mixed green and blue cloud into a narrow strip, like a long piece of beautiful ribbon. Its colors danced together and glowed in the night. Keeping my vision firmly on the door handle, I pushed the tip of my ribbon into the lock. Inside it, I could almost feel the mechanism. My ribbon, lining the lock, felt like my fingers. I concentrated on the feel of the lock and molded my energy tightly against it. With a firm push, the lock disengaged. I opened my eyes and grasped the door handle.

It opened.

I waited at the threshold. Nobody came running. My heart pounded as I peered around. The door must not be wired to anything. Sneaking out, I looked both ways before hurrying down the hall. The first turn I made brought me to an impressive view. Through huge windows, the front yard was visible. Moonlight and pale security lights shone outside. A huge, pebbled drive formed a circle around a large fountain. From there, the drive disappeared into a swamp of trees. I couldn't see a road or tell how far it was to the property line.

Moving quickly, I darted down another hall until I found a set of stairs. They were narrow and curved downward, solid walls on both sides. I didn't stop to assess anything.

I took them down at a run. It seemed to take forever. When I reached the bottom, there was a door. It wasn't locked.

I opened it cautiously. The door creaked softly. Smells of lingering cooked food greeted me. A dim light shone above a sink. It seemed I was in a small kitchen or butler's pantry. I closed the door quietly.

Blood whooshed through my ears as I waited, listening. Once again, I didn't hear anything.

I figured Cecile, or whoever else Marcus had for household staff, must only be in attendance during daylight hours. Either that or she'd retired to her quarters for the night.

The security team that Raven hinted at had yet to be seen. Walking quietly across the floor, my heart stopped when I saw the first security camera. It hung in the corner of the kitchen, its lens like an all seeing eye. A moment of panic consumed me. I stood rooted to the spot. An image of Marcus' men tackling me and pinning me to the ground flashed in my mind.

Move, Lena!

I raced out of the room, knowing if anyone was watching I'd have been spotted. The small kitchen opened to a larger one, making my initial guess that the previous one had been a butler's pantry, accurate. I didn't bother to assess any more details. I raced to the next room and then the next. My heart pounded. Sweat dripped into my eyes. I hadn't accounted for how warm I'd be in the bulky attire on my race *out* of the house.

A hallway appeared at the end of the room as I dashed through it. Soft light washed across its floor. My eyes widened. *Is someone already looking for me?*

I heard voices speaking. I stopped and plastered myself to the wall, listening. My heart was beating so hard it felt as if it would explode out of my chest.

No, not voices, *a* voice. I crept closer to the hall and paused. I was in a sitting room of some kind. Large portraits hung on the walls. The occupants stared down at me as if sharing in my secret escape. If I were Harry Potter, they'd probably wink at me.

The voice sounded louder.

Marcus.

It seemed he was talking on the phone to someone. I caught my name a few times. My blood grew cold. Looking for a way out, I almost groaned

when more bulletproof, inaccessible windows stared back at me. I needed to find an exit. The windows certainly weren't an option unless I wanted to make a scene.

Creeping into the hallway, I checked to make sure Marcus wasn't standing in the hall talking on the phone.

It was empty.

I tiptoed along the empty hall. His voice seemed to be coming from another room. Light peeked out from a partially opened door ahead. A chair and a full bookcase were visible. A swiveling sound from a chair being turned penetrated the conversation. The back of Marcus' head appeared. My heart stopped. He was in a home office, sitting in that chair.

Holding my breath, I crept quietly past the room. Sweat trickled down my temple. His next words stopped me short.

"I had Raven give her the pregnancy tests. He said she hadn't taken them when he went in with her supper. If she hasn't taken them by morning, I'll draw a blood sample and process it myself." He paused, then chuckled softly. "Yes, that's what I was thinking too. How long have we wanted another pregnant subject? We haven't had one since Raven's mother. There are so many things I want to try with her. The possibilities for her baby are extraordinary."

More silence.

"I know. I know. We can't let corporate get wind of this. They'll shut us down for good if they know."

Marcus continued talking, but the blood pounded in my ears so loudly, I couldn't hear any more. *Another pregnant subject? Raven's mother?*

A few seconds ticked by before I realized I stood like a statue in the middle of the large hall. All Marcus had to do was turn and he'd spot me.

I bolted down the hall, not thinking about how much noise I made. I passed through a few more rooms before a large arched, double wooden door appeared. *The front door!*

When I reached it, I paused long enough to listen. I still didn't hear anybody. Marcus' office was far enough away that I no longer heard him. For a brief second, I processed what he'd said.

Marcus experimented on Raven's mother when she was pregnant.

I shook my head. Those thoughts would have to wait for later.

Sliding the lock on the door, I opened it cautiously. A light flashed in the corner of the foyer, just above the front door. *Crap!* I'd been in such a

hurry, I hadn’t bothered to check the security. Knowing it was only a matter of time before a guard arrived, I sprinted through the door.

The nighttime air hit me like a wall of ice. The blast of it against my sweaty face almost took my breath away. Lights lit up the exterior, throwing the pebble drive into a brightly lit oasis. A dog barked in the distance, followed by more barking.

Double crap! He has dogs!

There was no way I could outrun or hide my scent from a dog, but I’d have to try. I took off down the drive.

My feet made slapping crunches in the gravel. I jumped over a line of hedges and took off into the yard. At least it was darker this way, not that it would matter if there were dogs.

Shouting sounded from behind me. I kept running, darting through the trees surrounding the property. Low hanging branches scratched my face. I didn’t care. If I didn’t get out tonight, this was it. I’d be buried in an underground facility somewhere, mercilessly studied until Marcus deemed me no longer research worthy.

A solid wall appeared in the distance. The property was lined with a huge fence. It was at least twelve feet tall. My stomach sank, and I almost tripped. *How am I supposed to scale that?*

More barking sounded.

I heard them before I saw them. Thundering paws disturbed the gravel drive to my left, barking and growling grew closer to my right. The dogs’ labored breathing came next.

I turned just in time to see four Rottweilers closing in. A moment of panic engulfed me. For a moment, I didn’t do anything. It was only as a dog snarled and flew at me that I spurred into action. Welling up my power, I pulled it from me while simultaneously drawing energy from every living thing around me. I formed four, large balls and hurled them at the dogs.

The dogs went down like a stack of dominos. My mouth dropped at how quickly it happened. A momentary flash of guilt followed. *Did I kill them?*

A whine reached my ears. *No, didn’t kill them just hurt them.* A wave of relief followed.

I was about to turn when a hand clamped over my arm. A chuckle came next. “Going somewhere, Red?”

In the dim moonlight, Trevor smiled down at me.

My eyes widened. *Where did he come from?*

He wore military apparel. A gun was nestled in his palm. It was pointed directly at me as a radio clipped onto his shoulder crackled. A voice asked if I'd been located. Trevor's grip tightened. With his other hand, he reached up to press something on the radio.

Memories of that awful sound machine they'd used on us at Marin Headlands surfaced. Once more men came, they might use that machine. Then the chance of my escape disappeared.

Raising my foot, I stomped onto the arch of Trevor's foot with everything I had. He howled. His free hand dropped from the radio and reached for me. Power surged up around me. It formed almost instantly. For a brief moment, I remembered Flint's words.

Control yourself. No regrets.

I meticulously hurled a ball at Trevor just as his hand touched my bicep.

He shot twenty feet into the trees and caught on a branch. Considering he dangled listlessly from it, I knew I'd knocked him out, but I'd been careful. I knew I hadn't killed him.

My breath came out in harsh pants. I turned and ran.

Cold, night air flew across my face. A few tree branches snarled in my hair. More shouting sounded in the distance.

Men.

They're coming.

I ran along the perimeter wall in the direction of the gravel drive. A huge gate appeared. I formed the largest ball I'd ever managed and flung it at the imposing bars.

With a loud crack, the ball smashed through the metal. I simultaneously ran through it.

I kept running and didn't look back.

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

It seemed Marcus' property was far enough away from Chicago that no signs of the city or lights were visible. I stuck to the ditches and surrounding trees. Whenever I heard a vehicle, I ducked for cover or lay flat on my stomach in the woods, pulling my hood up. Each time the vehicle slowly passed me by, a bright spot light shining out the front window.

Marcus' men.

I could feel their clouds—searching, wanting, trying desperately to find me. Their clouds had an appetite to them, like blood thirsty lions on the hunt for weaker prey. They pulled at me like a torrent river threatening to pull me under. Every time they drove by, I barely breathed. My heart beat so loudly I feared they'd hear it even though I knew that was impossible.

I didn't know how long they searched for me. The entire night became a blur. Fear and cold were my constant companions. Each time I stumbled over the uneven ground in the forest, I felt certain the noise would alert them. Or that more dogs would come, following my scent, tracking me until I couldn't run anymore.

It felt as though I walked, and intermittently hid, forever. The only comfort I took was from the forest. Forests felt like home. I crept through the trees just off the county highway. Cloudy puffs of panicked breathing billowed around me as I stayed in the shadows, moving parallel to the road. I could only hope this stretch of highway would eventually lead me to civilization.

Images of life in a subterranean prison, mercilessly studied, never to see my loved ones again, kept me going. Besides, I'd been through worse. For weeks on end, I'd been hungry, thirsty, cold or burning hot during my homeless days. I'd survived that.

I could survive this too.

The sun lit the horizon when a town finally appeared. A few buildings, a church and a gas station were visible. Only a few streets made up the

town center. Considering the dark windows, it appeared the town's residents were still asleep.

I carefully assessed my surroundings. A sedan was parked by a church. Outlines of two men were visible. I felt their clouds. Searching. Yearning. Hungry to find me. *Marcus' men.*

Across from where they parked the gas station waited. It was the only thing open. My only chance at finding help.

You'll need to run. If I wasn't fast enough, those men could capture me before I made it through the doors.

I burst from the trees' canopy and raced across the road to the gas station. I must have caught Marcus' men by surprise. I was already sprinting past the pumps when one opened the sedan's door.

When I pushed through the gas station's double doors, the sleepy looking clerk stood up straighter. Scents of stale coffee and old donuts coated the air. I never thought I'd be so happy to smell anything so bad in my life.

With unsteady movements, I stumbled to the counter and sank against it, my forearms supporting me on the counter. "Do you have a phone I can use?"

Another shiver struck me. At least it was warm in here.

The clerk's half asleep expression vanished. His eyes wandered over my frame. I could only imagine what I looked like.

"Are you okay?" His protruding belly pushed against the counter.

I nodded. "Yeah. I just need a phone."

He pushed the landline at me with a shaky hand. I thanked him and punched in Flint's number.

Flint answered on the second ring. "Hello?"

My heart lodged in my throat. "Flint?"

A second of silence passed. Breathing increased on the other end. "Lena? Is that you?"

Tears pricked my eyes. "Yes. I'm in . . ." I paused and blinked the tears back. I had no idea where I was.

"Lena! Where? I'm coming right now. Just tell me where, babe!"

I looked at the clerk. "What town am I in?"

He rattled off some town I'd never heard of. I relayed it to Flint.

"Are you safe there?" Flint practically shouted. If I could feel energy through phones, I'm pretty sure his would have knocked me out.

“Um . . .” I looked around. *Will I be safe if Marcus’ men come in?* I didn’t think even Marcus would be daring enough to kidnap me with witnesses standing around. “I think so.”

“Don’t move. I’m on my way.”

I SPENT THE entire morning and early afternoon in the gas station. It was a surreal experience. The night clerk went home, after repeatedly asking me if he should phone the police. Each time I told him no, that I’d simply become lost after my car broke down and my family was on their way. Apparently, I was a bad liar. I could tell from his sideways glances and puckered brow that he didn’t believe me.

The day shift clerk was less suspicious and helped pass the time. She was bubbly, talkative and seemed happy to have someone to chat with throughout the morning. She gave me a free hot dog off the warmer and a soda from the machine. I nervously ate it. The dark sedan by the church was still parked across the street. The two men in it hadn’t moved.

I’d already decided what I’d do if they tried to kidnap me from the gas station. I’d use my energy balls. It would expose what I could do to the gas station clerk and anyone watching, but I’d have to.

I’d fight with whatever means necessary. I would *not* be imprisoned again.

I stayed close to the clerk but still jumped every time the bell sounded at the door. Each time I expected Trevor, Heath or another one of Marcus’ security men to barrel through the door. However, nobody ever emerged from that car.

Nervous energy strummed along my limbs regardless. By the time afternoon rolled around, I had a pounding headache.

When Flint and Father finally arrived, I felt them before they pulled into the parking lot. The energy pouring off Flint pulsed a half block in all directions. It rolled through me, washing over my senses. I’d never felt anything like it. My heart swelled when they peeled around a corner and careened to a stop.

Flint leaped out of the car and sprinted to the gas station. He didn’t bother to close his car door. Even in his hurried state, which he seemed to barely keep in check from morphing into an inhuman blur, I noticed the unshaved beard and dark circles under his eyes. It looked as if he’d lost weight.

When he crashed through the door, the little bell swung right off its hook. “Lena!”

I ran to him.

He caught me mid-stride and wrapped his arms so tightly around me I couldn’t breathe.

“Lena, Lena . . .” he murmured over and over. “Oh, Lena . . .” His arms clenched me so tightly it felt like my ribs would crack. He buried his face in my hair. I could feel his tears. They poured down his cheeks in uncontrolled rivers. I’d never seen him cry before—not like this.

“I’m okay. I’m okay.” I threaded my fingers through his hair. They were oily and dirty. His hair stuck up on all ends. “I’m okay,” I whispered for the tenth time.

I could feel everyone in the gas station watching us. I knew we were making a scene. I also knew that the depth of our emotions were on display.

Closing my eyes, I let the safe, comforting feeling that only Flint could evoke wash over me. *I’m safe. I’m with Flint. I’m okay.* Marcus no longer had me.

It was all that mattered.

“I thought I lost you,” Flint whispered. His entire body trembled. This close, his energy felt like a magnet pulling me toward him. I was helpless to resist, but I didn’t want to. I was with him. We were finally together. This is how it was always supposed to be. I inhaled deeply. Spice, wood and tangerines. *Safe. I’m safe.*

It was then that I started to cry. The past six days poured out of me. The rage, helplessness and despair were like a dam being released. It wasn’t until that moment that I truly understood how precarious of a situation I’d been in. I was lucky I got away.

“Shh, you’re okay now.” He ran his hands down my back, in my hair, his lips on my neck and face.

The feathery soft feel grounded me.

“I’ll never let him near you again.”

His aching tone was like an ocean current pulling me home. Finally, he was here holding me. Marcus couldn’t hurt me.

I didn’t know how long we stood like that. It wasn’t until Father approached and laid a hand on my shoulder that I pulled back.

“Galena,” he said hoarsely.

I unwrapped my arms from around Flint and hugged Father. Flint barely let go.

Father hugged me fiercely.

“Where’s everyone else?” I asked after I finally pulled back. Snot ran down my nose. My cheeks felt red and wet from tears. Neither Father nor Flint seemed to care. Both still held onto me.

Father discreetly dabbed his eyes. “A new location.”

I didn’t ask where. I knew he wouldn’t tell me here. “Are they all safe?”

“Yes.”

I sank in relief. That was all I needed to hear.

Flint gripped my hand tightly. “Let’s get out of here.” Before Father could turn, Flint awkwardly touched Father’s shoulder. “Thank you, Conroy. For . . .”

Father’s eyes softened. “No need to thank me, Flint.”

I eyed Flint questioningly. I’d never known him to thank Father for anything.

When we finally left, the clerk’s gaping mouth and wide eyes followed us. I knew we’d made a scene. I waved goodbye to her and mouthed *thank you*.

She merely nodded mutely.

The winter sun greeted us in the gas station’s parking lot. I scanned the street. The dark sedan was still parked by the church across the road. Black tinted windows shielded the interior. I could feel them watching.

Goosebumps rose along my arms. “Do you see them?”

“Yes.” Father’s mouth tightened. “I’ve been keeping an eye on them.”

I gave the sedan one last look when we pulled out of the parking lot. Outlines of two men were still evident. I wondered if one of them was Raven.

BY THE TIME the next day rolled around, we’d been flying for over ten hours. Of course, the men in that car had followed us to the airport. Because of that, Father changed flight plans. Twice. Paranoia had returned full force and for good reason.

During our never-ending time in the sky, Flint either gripped me tightly to him or held my hand. His energy hadn’t abated one bit. I didn’t make light of it, however, like I normally did when I wanted to calm him. I

felt just as desperately as he did. Now, more than ever, it was very real how dangerous our situation was.

“It was stupid,” he muttered, somewhere thirty thousand feet over Montana. It had to be one or two in the morning.

I’d been dozing on and off, the lack of sleep catching up with me. I sleepily opened my eyes.

“What was?” Dim cabin lighting glowed around us. Father slept in his chair a row ahead.

“Trying to lure Marcus to us in San Francisco. I never should have done it.” Flint hung his head.

I’d completely forgotten it was Flint’s idea to try and capture one of Marcus’ men by using the tracking device. “You can’t blame yourself.”

“Then who can I blame?” Guilt hung heavily in his cloud.

“No one. You don’t blame anyone. We all make mistakes.”

“A mistake that almost got you killed.” He gripped my hand tighter.

I didn’t tell him that it felt as if my bones were about to break or that my fingertips grew numb. The dark shadow cast over his face worried me more than my pinched circulation.

“Flint?” With my free hand, I stroked his hair. It was still coated in grease. I wondered if he’d showered once since I went missing. “Flint?”

He glanced at me, a haunted look in his eyes.

“I’m here now, and I’m safe. Okay?”

He pulled me closer to him. His normal scent was mixed with sweat and fear. I could only imagine the nightmares that had haunted him. The not knowing had to have been unbearable.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“Canada.”

“We’ve gone international?”

“It’ll be harder for Marcus to get so many men across the border, not to mention, smuggling firearms isn’t easy.”

“How long have you been there?”

“The others moved up there two days after you went missing. Conroy didn’t feel it was safe for us to stay in California.”

“The *others* moved? And where did you go?”

“I stayed in San Francisco, looking for you.”

“And Father?”

“He stayed with me. I don’t think he trusted me on my own. I was . . .” his voice caught. “Not kind to him. I lashed out repeatedly and called him names I’m not proud of. I blamed Conroy for what happened to you even though it was my fault.”

I opened my mouth to argue but he continued.

“Conroy never once raised his voice to me or said that *I’m* to blame, not him.” His voice caught again. “How come he didn’t blame me?”

Flint’s eyes were so anguished that tears clouded my vision. I blinked them back. Flint often saw things in black and white. I knew since he believed he failed me that he assumed Father would too, but Father wasn’t like that. Yet Flint refused to see that.

Our entire lives, Flint held Father at arm’s length. As the oldest in our group, Flint remembered more about O’Brien than any of us. He knew that Father had willingly subjected us to his drugs when we were young. He never forgave Father for that. Ever. As a teenager, it had grown worse. Flint at times barely treated Father decently.

Flint was the only one in our family who felt such animosity toward him, but Father never held it against him. Our entire lives, Father had shouldered the brunt of Flint’s anger, almost as if he felt he deserved it. But now, something in Flint’s tone was different. It was the first time I’d ever heard him talk about Father without derision.

“What did you and Father do?” I gently pushed a greasy strand of hair from his forehead. “After everyone moved to Canada?”

He clasped my hand and brought it to his lips. “We scoured the city for you since we had no trace to follow. Initially, Luke and Amber were able to track your scent, but they lost it over the Bay Bridge. And Luke used his psychic thing, but he said the signal was muddled like you fell off his radar or something. So Father called every contact he had. He barely slept, and not once did he say a word against me. Not once.”

“He loves you, Flint. He always will even though you push him away.”

Flint’s eyes swam with deeply buried emotions. His jaw clenched.

“He’ll never blame you, Flint, and he’ll forgive you readily for all of the years where you hated him. You’ll see.”

“I don’t deserve to be forgiven.”

“Yes, you do.”

He sighed heavily, his breath catching. “It didn’t matter that Conroy didn’t blame me. We still couldn’t find you.”

I touched his forearm. “They drugged me. That’s probably why I fell off Luke’s radar.”

Flint turned so quickly I fell against the seat. He pulled me up, his eyes searching mine. “What did they drug you with? Are you injured? Are you experiencing side effects? Conroy!” he yelled.

His bellow made me wince. “Flint, I’m *fine*.”

Father appeared at our sides, rubbing his eyes. “Yes, Flint? What’s wrong?”

“They drugged Lena.”

Father’s eyes widened. “They did? Do you know what they gave you?”

I shrugged helplessly. “Some drug that made my ability disappear. It was like it blocked something in my brain so I couldn’t use my power. It was the same thing he gave Susannah, Luke and Edgar so they couldn’t transform in the warehouse.”

“Tell me more.” Father sat across from me. “I want to know the details.”

After I finished explaining the drug’s color, how much was given to me, where it was administered, the side effects and feel, he leaned back.

“It sounds identical to the drug Edgar described to me. You’re right. It has to be the same one. I also think it’s the same drug Marcus was beginning to experiment with when I took all of you away, but that was fifteen years ago. He’s probably altered it since then to be more effective.” He steepled his hands. “And you say it worked? That your ability vanished within minutes?”

I nodded.

“That’s fast,” he murmured.

“There’s more.” Raven’s face flashed through my mind.

Flint’s energy doubled. “What *more?”*

I explained how excited Marcus had been when I told him I might be pregnant. Flint’s eyes turned into saucers, but I quickly reassured him it was just an escape tactic. “But he’s experimented on a pregnant woman before.”

Father’s head cocked, his brow furrowing. “He has?”

I squirmed and wrung my hands together. “Yes, he did, twenty-two years ago on your mother.” I peeked up at Flint.

Flint’s head snapped back. “My mother?”

“She was pregnant at the time with your brother.”

“My *brother?”*

I nodded again. “Did you know anything about this, Father?”

Father was silent a moment before shaking his head. “What do you mean, Flint’s mother? She died shortly after we took Flint and Di.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Marcus told me they found her dead, of an overdose a week after . . .” Father’s voice trailed off.

“She didn’t die, not then at least. Marcus took her. I think.” The conversation I heard outside his study drifted through my mind. “I overheard him talking to someone, about how he found another pregnant subject. And there’s one last thing.” I glanced at Flint again. “Your brother? The one that your mother carried in utero when Marcus experimented on her? He’s still alive.”

Both Flint and Father’s mouths dropped. The plane dipped, jostling us in our seats.

“He’s still alive?” Father finally said, his voice hoarse.

“Yes. His name’s Raven. He’s two years younger than Di. He’s lived with Marcus in secret his entire life. From what he told me, Marcus basically locked him away in his home, keeping him from friends, family and the outside world in general. And he’s different, like us.” I clasped Flint’s hand. “He’s another lost child. He can create fire, just by thinking it.”

“The elemental group!” Father whispered. “They were the group of ten who all died, originally Albert’s group. The drugs given to them were the harshest. Marcus and Albert were obsessed with the concept of creating a group of people that could control the elements, such as controlling the wind, manipulating water or the earth, creating fire, that sort of thing.”

I turned to Flint. “They gave your mother some drug when she carried Raven that seems to have created his ability. And Raven survived it, but your mom didn’t.”

Flint’s expression gave away nothing.

“Were there any other children he did this to?” Father asked urgently. “Was there anyone besides Raven that was born following those drugs?”

“No, I don’t think so. It was only him. He never mentioned anyone else.”

Father leaned back, his face contemplative.

“What are you thinking?” I asked.

He shook himself. “I’m wondering if Marcus has other hidden lost children. If this problem goes deeper than I thought.”

My insides went cold. “If he does, Raven doesn’t know anything about them. He thought he was the only person like him. One thing I am certain of is that Marcus lied to him his entire life. Marcus told Raven that he adopted him as an infant and that his ability was a genetic fluke. It was only yesterday that Raven began questioning everything Marcus told him. I’ve been talking to Raven all week, trying to get him to understand that his life has been a lie.”

Flint’s face paled. “Do you really think he’s my brother?”

“I’m sure of it.” I told both of them about Raven’s skin tone, mannerisms, facial features, personality, and everything else I could think of that made me believe they were related. “And then there’s this . . .” I reached into my pocket where I’d tucked away the tissue with a strand of Raven’s hair. “I figured you could do genetic testing, Father. Then we’ll know for sure if Raven’s their sibling or not.”

The tiny, black hair sat on the white tissue. I quickly covered it and put it back in my pocket before any disturbance in the cabin air blew it away.

“He gave you his hair?” The circles under Flint’s bloodshot eyes looked even darker.

“No. When he gave me a hug goodbye, it fell on my shoulder.”

“He knew you were going to escape?” A new light shone in Flint’s eyes.

“Not exactly. He thought Marcus was going to take me to a secret lab and he’d never see me again. That was Marcus’ plan, which is why I knew I needed to get out of there.”

A glacial expression settled over Flint’s face. “You mean Raven knew Marcus was going to lock you up and experiment on you, and he didn’t help you escape?”

I placed a hand on Flint’s forearm as his energy grew even more. “Don’t judge him. Marcus was his father. In the week we spent together, he was already starting to turn against him, but you can’t expect someone to turn on their family, even if their family is evil, overnight. Try putting yourself in his shoes.”

From Flint’s expression, I knew he wouldn’t be doing that anytime soon. Flint’s loyalty laid with me, just as Raven’s loyalty laid with Marcus. I sighed. The two were more alike than Flint realized.

“He’s kind, Flint. Please believe me. He’s not like Marcus, if anything, he’s like you.”

A look of disbelief crossed Flint’s features. “Me?”

I nodded. “That’s what struck me the most when I was around him, how much he reminded me of you.”

Flint grunted. Father, however, still looked speechless.

“And there’s one more thing I need to tell you.”

“There’s *more*?” Flint’s eyes widened.

“Yes, I gave Raven your phone number. I told him to call you if he decides to join us.”

“You gave him my personal phone number?” Flint’s expression hardened. “After he was going to let Marcus take you away, lock you up and experiment on you for the rest of your life.” Veins stood out in Flint’s neck. This was going worse than I thought it would. “*And* you gave him a number to a cell phone that can be tracked.”

Father leaned forward. “That’s easy to fix.” The shocked expression on Father’s face had turned to a thoughtful one. “Do you think he’ll call?”

“I hope so,” I replied.

The plane dipped. We started to descend. Greg came on the overhead speaker asking all of us to return to our seats and fasten our seatbelts.

I clicked my seatbelt on. “Did all your accounts get safely transferred? Is your money safe now?”

“Yes. Everything’s been moved, and I have access to it all. Marcus won’t be able to find it.”

I breathed a sigh of relief. At least there was one less thing to worry about.

A brooding expression covered Flint’s face as he stared out the dark window. He still clasped my hand, although not as tightly. His thumb roamed over the backs of my fingers. The feeling sent tingles up my arms.

I sighed. Hopefully, Di wouldn’t be as hard on Raven.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The landing strip lay nestled in a Canadian valley. Large mountains surrounded it, like cupped hands holding the runway. All of the mountains were covered in snow. Giant pines and evergreens dotted their bases. Through a distant valley, the dawn sun crested the horizon.

My heart swelled at the familiar look and feel. It felt like home. “Which mountain range is this?”

“The Canadian Rockies.” Flint gestured toward the peaks. “We’re north of Jasper National Park. No one will find us up here, not for a while at least.”

After we landed, Greg stepped out of the cockpit. Considering he’d just flown for over twelve hours, I expected him to look tired. However, he was bright eyed and alert. When he saw me, he smiled.

“Hi, Lena. Staying out of trouble?” He winked.

I laughed. “Hopefully, I will now.”

Greg grinned and opened the plane’s door. Fresh air swirled inside. It smelled like snow.

Since we didn’t have any luggage to retrieve, Flint, Father and I stood on the tarmac while Greg did a few safety checks on the plane’s exterior. I wrapped my arms around myself, shivering. I’d removed most of my layers during the flight and, in typical fashion, forgot them on the plane. I debated retrieving them, but I didn’t know if I wanted to. Those clothes had belonged to Marcus. They were the clothes he’d purchased in anticipation of my capture. Burning them seemed a more appropriate option.

Flint pulled me close. “Sorry, I didn’t bring a jacket. Otherwise, I’d give it to you.”

I snuggled into his warm embrace. “That’s okay, this will do.”

He chuckled softly.

Large, fluffy snowflakes fell around us. It wasn’t snowing. It was more that the wind picked up the coarse flakes from the ground and fluttered them through the air. I straightened when a rumble reached my ears.

I pushed away from Flint and listened. I knew that sound. I'd know it anywhere. During my homeless months, that sound had caused me to straighten, hope blooming in my chest as my eyes eagerly scanned the horizon.

"Is someone coming here?" I asked.

"That would be the twins." Father checked his watch. "I called them at our last fuel stop and told them when to pick us up."

At the end of the runway, a single lane, snow covered road snaked into the mountains. A pickup truck appeared around a bend.

"I'll be on my way then." Greg closed a small door on the jet. "Call when you need me."

Father nodded. "Thank you again, Greg. Fly safely."

I murmured a similar comment.

Greg dipped his head and climbed aboard the plane. The rumbling of the incoming truck was soon drowned out by the jet's engines. Greg had already taxied to the end of the runway and was taking off when the twins reached the tarmac.

I watched Greg disappear into the sky. A sting of worry filled my belly. Who knew why we'd have to contact him again. Hopefully, it wouldn't be to flee.

The twins' outlines in the truck cab grew as they approached. I switched my vision. Their colorful clouds appeared. The reddish hue in the driver's seat told me that Jet was driving, while the yellowish hue indicated Jasper was in the passenger's seat. Both leaped out when the truck careened to a stop.

"Lena!" the twins shouted.

Running toward them, I jumped into their arms. Both hugged me fiercely. I felt like lunch meat squished between a sandwich.

"Ah man, Lena." Tears streamed down Jet's face. "We thought we'd never see you again."

Jasper cried too, which only made me cry harder. It was a different feeling from the deep aching love I'd felt when Flint and I embraced, but it was still full of love. Jet and Jasper were my brothers, bloodlines be damned.

"Where's everyone else?" I wiped the tears off my cheeks. They were freezing into icy trails.

Jasper hooked a thumb at the mountain behind us. “At a cabin, our latest home.”

“For the moment, at least,” Jet said bitterly. “Until that bastard finds us and tries to take us again.”

“So what the hell happened?” Cloudy breaths puffed from Jasper’s mouth when he spoke. “How’d you get away?”

“Let’s get in the truck.” Father opened the door. “Lena can explain everything back at the cabin.”

The truck’s large cab sat three in the back and two in the front. The twins rode up front again, while Father, Flint and I sat behind them. I settled in the middle seat and closed my eyes. The familiarity of everyone’s presence washed over me. I sank in relief.

THE WELCOME I received at the cabin was very similar to Jet and Jasper’s. Lots of hugs, tears, more hugs and more tears. Jacinda hugged me longer than anybody. I choked up again as fresh tears poured down my cheeks.

“Oh, Little L!” Mascara smudges darkened her lower eyes. “Never, ever do anything like that again! I couldn’t bear it if I never saw you again!”

I just nodded.

Even Di looked emotional when I embraced her. “We’re so happy you’re back.”

I was passed around to everyone, like a serving platter at the dinner table. Everybody hugged me and told me how happy they were that I was back and okay. Even Luke and Edgar got a little teary, but when I finished hugging them, I realized one person was missing.

“Where’s Susannah?”

“Out flying.” Luke waved at the window. “She loves it up here.”

I could only imagine. Between the hundreds of miles of forested land, soaring mountains and numerous streams, it was an eagle’s paradise. “So she’s okay?”

Luke nodded, his golden eyes bright.

“Right,” Di said briskly. “Let’s show Lena her room. She probably wants to shower and clean up. And perhaps she’ll be able to convince somebody else to do the same.” She gave her brother a pointed look.

Flint stepped behind me. His palm settled against my lower back. “I’ll show you around.”

I hadn’t seen much of our new home, since as soon as I entered, I was accosted in the hallway. Now that everyone had calmed down, I was finally able to see it.

The cabin sat nestled in the trees, in the valley between two mountains. It seemed to be the only home out here. My first thought when I saw it, was that an avalanche could destroy it at any moment, but Father said the location was chosen based off the unlikeliness of that happening. Apparently, a contractor from Calgary had a number of homes in this general region that he’d built as specs and then marketed to the rich and famous as being rustic, indestructible and reclusive. The latter, of course, was what piqued Father’s interest.

Father had bought this property over two years ago. However, it was the first time he’d visited it.

“I’ll show you to our room.” Flint led me to the stairs.

I followed Flint from the entryway up a wide staircase. Everyone else stood huddled, watching us go. It felt as if we were at an airshow, and I was the plane. Their faces looked up, following me with smiles of wonder. I waved. The twins and Mica laughed.

When they disappeared from view, Flint grasped my hand. “They’re happy you’re back.” The heat from his warm palm was wonderfully searing.

We passed a number of bedrooms. Clothes and suitcases were strewn on the floor. It didn’t appear anyone had fully moved in.

“Which room is ours?”

“It’s at the end.”

Sunlight poured in through huge windows at the end of the hall. When we reached it, a railing stopped us. I peeked over the ledge. It overlooked a large living area below. A fire crackled in the hearth, and the windows on the main floor traveled all the way to the top of the second floor. It was literally a wall of windows.

“This home is beautiful.”

“Isn’t everything Conroy buys?” Flint’s tone was minus its usual derision. He tugged me into our room and closed the door behind us.

Before I could respond, he pulled me into his arms. His lips found mine. I let out a gasp before twining my arms around his neck. He groaned

and pulled me closer.

We kissed for so long, I had to stop to take a breath. Flint didn't slow down. He picked me up and had me on the bed before I could think two words. Once again, his hands and mouth were everywhere.

I met him every step of the way. A wild uninhibited need grew in me. The days of fear and longing poured into our lovemaking.

"I thought I lost you," he murmured. His teeth grated down my neck, nibbling on my sensitive spot.

I raked my hands through his hair. "I'm still here."

He plunged into me the second our clothes were off. I gasped at the intensity and feel of him. His energy was hot and heavy as it pulsed around us. I let it work its magic and pull me under its spell. Closing my eyes, I gave myself over to the sensations washing from him into me.

When we finished, we lay in a tangle of sweaty limbs and sheets. Flint continued to grip me tightly to his chest, the coarse hairs peppered on his pectorals tickling my cheek.

"I almost lost you," he said again. His energy still strummed heavily in the air.

I switched my vision while simultaneously pulling upon my own power. I grabbed a hold of Flint's cloud. The ball pulsed. It was so powerful and raw. I snapped my gaze back to normal and let it dissipate.

"But you didn't," I reminded him. "I got away."

"With no help from me. I should have been the one to help you, but instead, you were left on your own. None of us could find you. It didn't matter that we have all these powers and abilities. What good did it do?"

I pushed up onto his chest so I could look into his eyes. They were filled with pain. "It's not your fault, Flint. If I'm not mad at you then you shouldn't be either."

"How can you *not* be mad at me? I failed you."

My mouth fell open. "Is that really how you view this? That you failed me?" I moved closer to him and cupped his cheek in my hand. "You are *not* responsible for me. You have to stop thinking that every time something goes wrong that it's your fault because it's not!"

He stared at me, not saying anything.

"We're not kids anymore. Haven't I proven that I can take care of myself?"

His jaw clenched. Pain still filled his eyes.

I softened my tone. “Let me take care of myself. You don’t need to always put me first. And the day will come, someday, where I’ll need to take care of you. If we’re going to grow old together, you need to let me do that. We’re equal partners, remember?”

He tucked a thick strand of curls behind my ear. “It’s not easy for me, giving up control and letting you be the strong one.”

“I know. That’s why I usually let you take charge, but sometimes you’re going to have to let that go. This is one of those times. Yes, we made a mistake. Maybe we shouldn’t have tried to lure Marcus’ men. But it turned out okay, and I actually learned a lot about Marcus and found Raven in the process. Maybe it was meant to be.”

His eyes darkened when I mentioned Raven. “He still hasn’t called.” The tone of his voice made me wonder if Flint *wanted* him to call.

“I hope he does.” My heart broke for the boy who had spent his life alone and isolated from everyone else. “He’s your brother, Flint. I’m sure of it.”

“Do you still have that piece of hair?”

“As long as I didn’t lose it.”

His lips tugged up. “There’s always that possibility.”

I pinched him playfully in the arm. “I haven’t lost anything in a while. I’m doing better.”

“Says the girl who loses her phone every time she sets it down.”

“That’s what ringers are for. You just call it when you can’t find it.”

He laughed and hauled me into his arms. “I missed you.”

I gripped him tightly. “I missed you too.”

A few yells sounded from outside our door. It sounded like the twins.

I cocked my head. “What did they say?”

“I think it was something along the lines of, *wondered if we were done yet or not.”*

Heat flushed my cheeks. “Why is it that everybody always knows what we’re doing?”

“Funny how living in close quarters does that. We still haven’t got that month alone in a hotel.”

“That’s the first thing we’re doing once Marcus is taken care of.”

WE GOT UP and showered. I was right about Flint. He hadn’t showered or shaved since I went missing. We soaped each other up, which

of course made one thing lead to another. By the time we got out, thick steam coated the mirror.

It was only as we were toweling off that I realized something. My hand flew to my mouth, my eyes widening.

“What?” Flint wrapped a towel around his middle, his hard toned abs peeking out.

“My birth control. I haven’t taken it in a week!”

His eyes widened.

I had to admit, that for so many years where he’d been the responsible one and so conscious of the possibility of *that* happening, it was a little ironic that a mere kidnapping had thrown all of his concerns out the window.

Flint took a deep breath before his jaw tightened. “We’ll worry about that if it happens, but right now, that’s not something we can focus on.”

I knew he was right.

With Marcus still hunting us, Raven out there on his own, and us flying around the continent from hiding spot to hiding spot—unprotected sex wasn’t high on the list. However, a pregnancy could change everything.

The blood drained from my face.

Flint hauled me into his arms. I knew he was trying to be supportive and strong but considering his energy just increased tenfold, I wasn’t entirely convinced.

“It’s going to be fine.” He pulled me to the bedroom and picked up my suitcase. Inside were my clothes from San Francisco.

I lifted my favorite shirt. Seeing my own things helped. I felt more grounded, more like myself and not quite so panicked.

“What do we do with these?” Flint held up the clothes Marcus had given me.

“I heard a crackling fire in the living room.”

Flint chuckled, shoved the clothes under his arm and pulled me downstairs to join the others.

ALL OF US settled in the living room after lunch. Father and Jacinda had made a huge feast. I felt pleasantly full as I sat beside Flint. It was hard to keep my eyes open. Besides dozing on the plane, I hadn’t slept in over thirty-six hours.

We moved the furniture to form a half circle around the fire. The twins, Mica and Di squeezed together on one sofa. Jacinda, Luke, Edgar and Amber were on the other. Flint and I took the love seat. Susannah was still nowhere to be found.

It had started legitimately snowing, not just the wind blowing it. Fat snowflakes danced outside, getting caught in the numerous pines dotting the property. The ones that stayed free accumulated on the ground. It reminded me so much of our Colorado home that a wave of nostalgia hit me.

Father sat in the chair closest to the fire. The fire's warmth and crackling filled the room. With worry in his eyes, Father leaned forward and clasped his hands. "Since it's obvious Marcus has no intention of letting us live in peace, we must decide what we want to do. We have two options: continue hiding or confront him."

The nervous chatter disappeared. Everyone fell silent.

"That's a no-brainer." Jet sneered. "That sorry son-of-a-bitch isn't going to control my life."

Di glanced between Jet and Father. "Easier said than done."

"But is that what you want?" Jet retorted. "To run from place to place every time he finds us? That's not living, that's surviving."

Edgar shrugged. "Maybe we can find a place Marcus will never locate."

"Like here in Canada," Amber agreed. "Or we could go to another country."

"We're here on visitor visas." Mica rolled her eyes. "I'm not sure even Father has the power to make us legal."

"It would require time and money." Father drummed his fingers on his knee. "But it would be possible if that's what you all want."

Jet shook his head. "It's still hiding. I don't want to hide anymore."

"What about going to the police?" Amber suggested. "He kidnapped Lena. He could go to jail for that. Wouldn't that take care of him?"

I bit my lip. "If we tell the police, Marcus could indict Father too. He was just as involved in Project Renatus."

Jacinda nodded. "Marcus probably wouldn't go down quietly. If he were to be jailed, he'd bring everyone down with him."

"And once it was out what we can do, scientists or doctors may want to study us," Jasper added. "No thanks. I'll pass."

Amber shrugged.

Edgar smiled encouragingly and put his arm around her shoulders. She snuggled closer to him.

Di stood and paced. “So confront him or keep hiding? Those essentially are our two options.”

“It sounds like the twins aren’t willing to hide.” Flint laid a muscular arm around my shoulders.

Jet sighed and gave Jasper a questioning look. Their faces twitched a few times before Jasper turned back to the group. “We’ll do what everyone wants, but we prefer to fight.”

“Do you know how many men are working for him?” Flint turned to me. “Confronting him wouldn’t be so easy if they outnumber us. They also have advanced weapons, as we learned in San Francisco.”

I remembered that sound machine. I never did find out what it was or who invented it. Just thinking of it made me cringe. One blast of that and I’d be useless again.

“Any idea, Lena?” Di asked. “You were closest to them. Did you overhear anything or see anything?”

I nodded. “He has ten men. Raven told me about them. They travel with Marcus when needed and guard his house. The ten men who surrounded us in the Headlands are the same men.” I described in more detail where I was kept and what I’d seen.

“Marcus has always had criminal contacts.” Father adjusted his glasses. “He has a huge underground network of them. Just because he routinely uses the same ten men doesn’t mean there won’t be more.”

Jacinda cocked her head. “Who’s Raven?”

My eyes widened when I realized I hadn’t told them. “I think he’s Di and Flint’s brother. He’s been living with Marcus since he was born. Marcus hid him from everyone, even Father, and he’s like us. He has abilities too.”

Shocked expressions filled the room before everyone erupted in a roar.

“No shit!” Jet exclaimed. “Are you serious?”

“What makes you think they’re related?” Mica beamed.

“There’s more of them?” Amber’s mouth dropped.

I waited until everyone calmed down. When it was quiet enough for me to speak, I relayed the same information that I’d told Flint and Father on the plane.

“Marcus raised him as his own son. Raven knew nothing about Project Renatus until a month ago.” I remembered that brief conversation I’d overheard outside Marcus’ study on the night I escaped. “From what I overheard, Marcus and some other guy, most likely Albert, experimented on Di and Flint’s mother when she was pregnant with Raven.”

“So he’s from the elemental group if he’s one of Albert’s.” Luke growled. “He’s like those kids that died.”

“And you think he’s Di and Flint’s brother?” Mica grabbed a handful of mints from a bowl on the coffee table. “From how he looks and acts?” She popped a few in her mouth.

I nodded. “Yes.”

“Father said you have a strand of his hair.” Di’s face was unreadable, but her hands clasped together so tightly they were white.

“It’s upstairs,” I said.

“Don’t lose it.”

I rolled my eyes. “How about I give it to you for safe keeping?”

“Good idea.”

Di didn’t seem to pick up on my sarcasm.

“I also think Albert’s still involved in Project Renatus, even though you haven’t seen him in years.” I eyed Luke and Edgar. “Marcus was talking to somebody on the phone the night I escaped. It seemed he and Marcus are working together, and their plan was to experiment on me after I told them I was pregnant.”

A few gaped mouths followed that statement.

“Which I’m *not*,” I replied. “Never mind. It’s a long story.”

“Unless Marcus has recruited someone else, which I doubt, then that most likely was Albert,” Father said. “When I spoke with my O’Brien contact, he said Project Renatus was all but dead. The current CEO does not share his father’s interest in the project—he’s prohibited any further progression. Most likely, it’s only Marcus and Albert left.” Father frowned. “If Raven’s powers were created in utero, then it would be logical for Marcus to be interested in experimenting on another pregnant woman.”

“At what expense to the mother?” Flint muttered darkly. His arm tightened around me.

Everyone fell quiet. It was possible Flint and Di’s mother had been killed in the process. Or perhaps she’d survived it, and Marcus murdered her after she had Raven, or perhaps she survived just long enough to give

birth to him and then died of the drug's side effects. Or maybe, just maybe, she was still alive somewhere. Most likely, we'd never know.

"So what are we going to do?" Luke's caramel colored eyes had flitted from person to person, like a predator assessing his prey. "I don't know about the rest of you, but as nice as these places are we keep moving to, I don't want to be in hiding forever."

Mica shook her head vigorously. "Me neither."

"Neither do I." I glanced at my tattoo. A perfect circle divided into quarters. "We haven't gone through so much in the last year for it to all be for nothing." Every day my tattoo served as a reminder of how Father tried to forge a safe life for us and how that plan had failed. Now, we were back in hiding, only it was worse. Marcus was using every resource he had to find us.

Di stopped pacing long enough to face everyone. "It's a vote then. All in favor of confronting Marcus?" Most of us raised our hands. Amber and Edgar didn't.

Di coolly assessed them. Reluctantly, Amber raised her arm. Edgar followed.

Father sighed heavily. "It's decided then."

I nodded. "Now we need to figure out how to confront Marcus without getting killed."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

We spent the rest of the afternoon hashing out plans and throwing ideas back and forth. I drank three cups of coffee which helped me stay awake for it.

We knew it was only a matter of time before Marcus got a tip on where we'd gone. Whether it be from workers at the airport, an attendant at the car rental company, or someone in the real estate agency who Father had purchased the cabin from, it didn't matter. Sooner or later, Marcus would have a lead.

Susannah showed up in the midst of our discussion. She crept in through the back door, her movements silent. The only reason I knew she was there was from the energy shift. Her cloud grew and pulled at me.

She stood quietly, watching us. She stayed like that for the next few hours. Since she didn't seem to want anyone knowing she was there, I didn't say anything. I made a mental note to fill her in later on what we discussed. Most likely she'd ignore me or stare at me blankly, but it was worth a try.

Di finally put an end to our conversation in the evening. It was obvious we weren't coming up with a concrete plan today. Too many of us argued or disagreed on what should be done. As always, we had to reach a unanimous decision or we didn't move forward.

When we stood, I stretched and glanced out the dark windows. The sun had disappeared by four in the afternoon. My reflection stared back. I padded to the windows and cupped my hands against the cold panes. Outside, white glowed on the ground. The trees towered skyward in dark lines.

I felt Susannah's presence behind me. Her energy strummed softly into my back. She stayed silent. I pretended that I didn't know she was there.

"It's colder up here than anywhere I've flown before." Her tone was soft.

I turned around and smiled. She stood still, her hands clasped together. “Do you like it?”

She nodded, her eyes dipping down. “Yes. It’s beautiful.”

It was the most she’d ever said to me. Heck, I think it was the most she’d said to *anybody* other than Father. “What’s it like when you fly?”

Susannah cocked her head. Her eyes got that faraway look. “Peaceful.”

“Sounds nice.”

The wistful look vanished. Her gaze darted to the others, as if worried they were listening, but nobody paid us any attention. Her shoulders relaxed. “It is. I love flying.”

“I felt you when you came in. Your energy is very strong.”

“It is?” She cocked her head again at unnatural speed.

I nodded. “So . . . do you have a preference for how we deal with Marcus?”

Her tranquil expression vanished. Her irises flashed yellow before shifting back to blue. “I know what I’d like to do to Marcus.” She abruptly turned and slipped away.

I watched her go, wanting to kick myself for bringing the subject up. Wrapping my arms around my middle, I shivered. A chill hovered in the air this close to the windows.

Flint approached. “What’d she say?”

I shrugged. “Nothing really.”

“It’s good to see her talking. You’re the first person she’s spoken to all day.”

“And then I had to blow it.”

I felt his questioning glance but didn’t explain.

Sounds of pans being pulled from cupboards and slicing on a chopping board sounded from the kitchen. Mica and Jasper were hard at work.

“Do you want to help with dinner?” Flint brushed a curl from my eye.

“Sure.”

We spent the next hour preparing supper. The normalcy of the everyday routine grounded me. It was so good to be back with my family. The ease, love and laughter that filled our homes easily transported into this one too. It made me realize more than anything that it didn’t matter where we were as long as we were together.

But try as I might to let the tranquil feeling of family and togetherness slide into me, I couldn’t completely get swept away. That shift in

Susannah’s gaze stayed with me. Susannah always seemed like a timid, scared woman, but that look I saw in her eyes told me she was anything but. And Raven’s face kept drifting through my mind. Every few hours, I asked Flint if he’d had any calls or texts from an unknown number.

Nothing yet.

I sighed. It was possible I’d never see Raven again.

THE NEXT DAY, I felt a hundred times better. After twelve hours of sleep, a shower and a large cup of coffee, I felt ready for what lay ahead. A part of me still shuddered every time I thought about Marcus or remembered how close I’d come to a life of imprisonment. But each time as I sank into a bottomless chasm of fear, Flint would brush a finger across my cheek or drape an arm around my shoulders, and once again, I’d feel safe, those fears pushed to the background.

It was only as we all sat down in the living room to resume our discussion that I noticed a calendar in the kitchen. It was two days before Christmas. Normally, this was my favorite time of the year. I had hoped so much we’d be able to enjoy a normal Christmas, that everything would be behind us by now, but given our current situation, that seemed impossible.

Piled in the living room, the arguments resumed. Until we figured out what we were doing, we were at a stalemate.

The twins and Mica were hell bent on causing a war. Di wanted a stealthy approach. Jacinda, Luke, Edgar and Amber were caught in the middle. None of them had a firm direction or idea on what they wanted to do. Susannah was nowhere to be seen. And as usual, Father let us make the decisions. He gave us key information when we needed it, but he knew that we were no longer children. We could forge our own paths.

“We need to act now!” Jet pounded his fist into his palm. “Marcus is probably looking for us at this very moment. Don’t you think it’s best if we find him before he finds us?”

“And what?” Di retorted. “Run up to him yelling and screaming like children, demanding he leave us alone?”

“At the very least we can show him we’re not afraid,” Jasper countered. “Hiding and running only tells him we’re weak.”

“Or smart,” I interjected. Just the thought of that sound machine made me shiver.

And so the morning and afternoon went. If it wasn't one of us yelling and disagreeing, it was another. By the time late afternoon rolled around, I had a pounding headache and a silent plea for an avalanche to end it all.

The twins wouldn't back down. They wanted to act now, whereas everyone else agreed it was foolish. It was only when Luke stormed through the back door, cold air billowing through the room that the arguments finally stopped.

"Has anyone seen Susannah?"

The conversation stilled mid-sentence.

"No." Jet glanced at the door. "Didn't she go flying this morning?"

Jacinda turned in her chair. "Yes, I saw her leave. That's what she's done the last few mornings. She's probably still out."

"She's usually back by now." Di's brow pinched together when she glanced at the clock.

"I can't sense her anymore." Luke's eyes flickered to gold.

Dead silence followed that statement.

Mica finally broke the quiet. "What do you mean, you can't sense her?"

"You know . . ." Luke tapped his head. "With my tracking thing."

Jet rolled his eyes. "Care to translate?"

"She's gone," Luke replied, as if that answer should have been obvious.

"Gone?" Flint's energy picked up. "What do you mean, *gone?"*

"If my senses are right, she's no longer in the area."

My blood ran cold. "Does that mean Marcus has her?" I couldn't possibly fathom how Marcus could have found us this quickly. I'd only come here twenty-four hours ago.

"I don't think so." Luke frowned. "I never picked up fear from her, just the usual peacefulness she has when flying, and she didn't drop off my radar like you did, Lena. It was more like she faded away."

What does that mean?

"How far away does she have to travel for you to lose her signal?" Di sat forward in her seat, her dark eyes sharp.

"Over a hundred miles. I can usually pick up people until then."

"So she's flown out of the area?" Jasper raised his eyebrows.

Luke nodded. "That's what I'm guessing."

Father stood from his chair. "We need to find her. Now."

“You don’t think she’ll come back?” Di asked.

“I asked her to stay close.” Father pulled his coat on. “If she’s left the area, that concerns me.”

Luke’s eyes glowed. “Let’s go.”

We all jumped from our couches and chairs, our discussion on what to do with Marcus forgotten. Everyone had their jackets and boots on and were out the door within a minute. We piled into the three trucks Father had bought in Calgary. Di, Flint and Jet drove. Apparently, Jet and Jasper had been practicing their driving skills while I’d been held captive. Given how Jet almost slid off the end of the driveway, though, I wasn’t overly sure he was ready for actual highways.

“Is he going to be okay?” Jacinda leaned forward, watching the sliding pickup. She and Luke sat in the back of the truck. Flint and I occupied the front. In the truck behind us were Di, Father, Amber and Edgar. The twins and Mica were in the fishtailing truck ahead.

“I’m thinking we should lead.” Luke’s deep voice rumbled in the cab. “I’ll tell you where to go when I pick up Susannah’s trail.”

Flint flashed his lights at Jet while I called Mica’s phone. It took a few minutes, but we finally got situated. Flint took the lead, Jet came next and Di pulled up the rear.

“Which way do you think we should go?” Flint asked Luke. “North or south?”

Luke closed his eyes and inhaled deeply. I wanted to turn around and watch but figured that would be weird. Luke did a few of his inhaling and exhaling things. It obviously wasn’t to pick up a scent. I figured the breathing must somehow clear his head or activate his psychic tracking ability.

After a moment, Luke opened his eyes and looked left. “Go south, I think. That’s the direction she was heading when she dropped off.”

Flint turned south at the highway junction which headed toward the nearest town. It took almost thirty minutes to get there. When we finally arrived, he stopped at another intersection. The road stretched in all directions.

“Keep going south?” Flint eyed the werewolf in the rearview mirror.

This time, I turned to watch.

Luke frowned and closed his eyes again, inhaling deeply. His large shoulders tensed before his eyes flashed open. “Southeast, I think.” He

didn’t look entirely sure of himself.

Flint turned, almost reluctantly, to the eastern road. The others followed.

We continued like that into the night. At every new intersection, Luke would close his eyes, inhale and exhale, before telling us which way to go. I was beginning to drift off in my seat, the dark night sky and warm cab begging me to sleep, when ringing from my bag jolted me awake.

I pulled out my phone. It was Amber calling.

I tapped the screen and brought the phone to my ear. “Hi.”

“Stop!” Amber yelled. “Tell Flint to stop driving! Di just had a vision. Susannah’s flying to Chicago! She’s going to confront Marcus!”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

The next few hours were a manic blur. We all stopped to convene and figure out a plan. Father called Greg and arranged for him to pick us up in Edmonton. It was a two-hour drive to get there, but it wouldn't be any faster to head back to Grande Prairie. We drove as fast as we dared. The last thing we wanted was to get pulled over.

"What is she thinking?" Jacinda shook her head, her words filled with disbelief. "There's no way she can defeat Marcus on her own."

On the dark highway, the only thing visible was the road illuminated by the headlights. Dim lights from the dash lit up the cab, casting everyone's faces into shadows. The others followed, probably having similar conversations in their vehicles.

"She hates Marcus." Luke put an arm around Jacinda's shoulders. "I know she doesn't say much, but over the years she tried to kill him a few times. That never worked obviously. It only got her punished which only made her hate him more."

"How'd she try to kill him?" Jacinda asked hesitantly.

"A few times she tried to strangle him when he was about to administer a new drug. After the second time she tried that, he kept her restrained. Another time, she got a hold of a syringe and plunged it into his neck. It didn't hit anything, just left a bloody puncture site. That stunt got her locked up in isolation for a month. And there was another time . . ."

I stopped listening after hearing she got locked in isolation for a month. If I hadn't escaped, that could have been me. Not to mention, how desperate had Susannah felt to attempt those things? Anger burned in my gut. *Damn Marcus!*

"If only we knew she was going to leave." Jacinda wrung her hands. "Maybe we could have talked her out of it."

An image of Susannah flashed through my mind—that look in her eyes last night. That look personified how much she hated Marcus. I never dreamed she'd act on it. Not when we were safe from him and so far away.

“We’re almost there.” Hot energy rolled off Flint. Lights from Edmonton lit up the sky. The city grew in size as we approached.

It was well past midnight by the time we arrived at the airport. Our familiar pilot greeted us with tired eyes outside of the terminal. I figured Father woke him with his call.

I smiled. “Thanks for coming, Greg.”

“Wouldn’t miss it.”

“Don’t we need our passports?” Amber stepped closer to Edgar and hugged her arms around herself. It was freezing.

My eyes widened. I hadn’t considered that.

“I’ve got them.” Father waved for us to follow before saying over his shoulder, “Di and I collected them before we left.” He began walking to Customs.

Mica rolled her eyes. “Always thinking ahead.”

Di tightly clutched her purse, her short dark hair brushing against her jaw. “Come on, let’s get a move on.”

THE FLIGHT TO Chicago was dark and quiet. I fell asleep soon after take-off. The thought of going back to Chicago, or being near Marcus and getting captured again, haunted my dreams. At one point, I woke up in a cold sweat, a scream caught in my throat. Flint bolted awake beside me. It was as if he knew what I’d been dreaming. He pulled me closer, his hard arms going around me.

We landed shortly after that. It was four in the morning when we went through U.S. Customs. When finished, we returned to the tarmac. The scream of planes and bright lights from O’Hare filled the night sky. While we waited for our ride, Father ushered us to the nearest hanger. A large wreath hung on the outside. The tacky, red bow was as vibrant as a fire engine.

“It’s Christmas Eve today.” That realization made me stop short.

A few sleepy glances met mine.

“It is?” Mica yawned.

“It’s technically the twenty-fourth even though it’s still nighttime.”

“Well Merry freakin’ Christmas,” Mica said glumly.

Flint hugged me to his side. “Next year’s Christmas will be better.”

Luke stepped away from the group, a raised eyebrow at the downcast mood. Since he had no idea how much the holiday meant to us, he probably

didn’t understand why this was the most depressing Christmas ever.

While Luke did his tracking thing, the rest of us huddled in a group. Our breaths puffed in cloudy plumes around us. Jacinda began humming, *Joy To The World*. Amber and I sang the lyrics. The small Christmas cheer made me smile despite our dire circumstances.

Luke joined us a few minutes later and shook his head. “I can’t pick her up.”

Jacinda stopped humming. My voice trailed off. The brief moment where things hadn’t seemed so bad, disappeared.

Di gave Luke a hard look. “She’s heading this way. I’m sure of it.”

Luke held up his hands. “I’m not saying you’re wrong.”

“How long will it take her to get here?” Jet yawned loudly.

“A normal bald eagle will fly high when migrating, catching updrafts,” Mica piped in. “They can usually go around fifty to seventy-five miles per hour, and considering it’s around eighteen hundred miles from where we were in Canada to Chicago, and she left twelve hours ago, she should be here within the next twelve hours.”

We all stared at her.

She grinned. “I Googled it.”

I smiled, shaking my head. “We should probably remember that Susannah’s not a normal eagle.”

Flint nodded. “She’s twice as big, so she can probably fly faster.”

“She’ll be here at some point today.” Di seemed annoyed that we were questioning Susannah’s arrival. “I *saw* it.”

“Ah,” Father said. “Our ride’s here.” A black limousine pulled up.

I jumped back. It looked just like the limo I’d ridden in with Marcus.

“Are you okay?” Flint’s hand settled on my waist.

I brushed off my fear and nodded. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine.” I forced my wooden-like legs to bend and move forward. One by one, we piled into the limo.

“Do you know where she’ll go when she gets here?” Jasper inspected the minibar as we drove out of the airport.

Di shook her head. “She lands in a forest, so that doesn’t give me much to go on for location. The only glimpse I’ve seen of her surroundings is a fountain.”

Fountain? My blood ran cold. I leaned forward. My voice shook when I spoke. “What kind of fountain?”

Di closed her eyes as if summoning the image. “It’s tall, maybe fifteen feet, with two children at the top clasping hands while water sprays out of their mouths.”

The blood drained from my face. “Does it sit on a pebble drive?”

Di frowned. “Yes, how did you know that?”

“Because I know exactly where that fountain is. That’s the fountain on Marcus’ property, just outside his house, and his home is surrounded by a forest.”

KNOWING WE WERE returning to Marcus’ mansion, the property I’d tried so desperately to escape from, made me sick. I never wanted to go back there again. Thinking of that bedroom, the gilded cage where he’d held me prisoner, made both nausea and rage boil inside me. The only solace I took from any of it was thinking about Raven.

It was possible we’d meet again. Maybe this time, with his brother and sister at my side, he’d be more open to joining us. Flint still hadn’t received a call from him, and with each day that passed, I knew it was less and less likely we’d hear from him, but still, I hoped.

The motel we pulled into was about thirty miles from Marcus’ home, near the Wisconsin and Illinois border. Father, Di, Flint, Jacinda and the twins booked rooms using our fake IDs. As usual, we all acted as if we didn’t know one another. Pretending we were normal people, just needing a room for the night, while traveling for the holidays was such an easy role to fall into. It once again reminded me that our lives were essentially built on a lie.

When Flint and I finally stepped into our room, we both fell onto the bed, barely getting our shoes off before falling asleep. It wasn’t until bright sunlight peeked through the curtains and the sound of a ringing phone sounded, that either of us woke.

I peeked outside the window while Flint searched for my cell. Outside was a blow-up Santa Claus. His giant hand waved to passing vehicles on the highway.

Flint finally found my phone and answered. “Yeah?” He put it on speaker.

“Di just had another vision.” It was Father. “Susannah’s outside Marcus’ house, perched on a tree at this very moment.”

I dropped onto the mattress, the springs squeaking while fear clawed my throat. “What are we going to do?”

A moment of silence passed. I could practically feel Father’s trepidation.

Father cleared his throat. “We’ll join her. I think the twins may be right. I think it’s time we confront Marcus and end this once and for all.”

For a moment, I sat there dumbstruck. I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. *Father* was saying this? Our secretive, fearful, always hiding *Father*, was saying this?

“Are you sure?”

He sighed heavily. “Yes.” He hung up.

I sat as still as a stone.

Flint touched my arm. “Are you okay?”

I forced a smile as images of Marcus, drugs and black cells swirled through my mind. “Yeah.” But fear made me tremble.

SINCE NONE OF us had anything other than the clothes on our backs and whatever we’d grabbed on our way out the door last night, nobody bothered to shower or change. Susannah at this very moment was perched on a tree outside of Marcus’ home. The longer she sat there, the more likely she’d be spotted. Given her size, there was no way she’d be mistaken for a normal eagle. Marcus was bound to capture her, or worse, kill her, the longer she was on her own.

“We need vehicles.” Father surveyed the busy highway outside our motel window. The limo we’d hired was long gone. “Flint and Di? There’s a car dealership down the road. We can buy two there. Would you like to join me?”

Father’s authoritative tone and brisk manner set me on edge. Normally, he was prone to hashing things out as a group and letting us decide our own fates. Today there was none of that. Father was in charge.

Watching the three of them disappear out the door only made my anxiety grow. With the remaining eight of us in the motel room, it felt crowded and claustrophobic.

It didn’t help that Luke paced, low growls emitting from his throat like deep rumbles from the passing semis. Jacinda kept wringing her hands. Amber and Edgar huddled in the corner. Only Mica and the twins seemed

ready for what was to come. Nervous yet excited energy emitted from the three of them.

But this was different from our previous encounters with Marcus and his men. For one, we had no time to plan, and two, we'd be on Marcus' turf. He'd have a distinct advantage.

"I need some air." I bounded out of the room.

I stood in the parking lot and took in huge gulps of cold winter wind. The huge blow-up Santa swayed in the breeze. If only I felt as happy as he looked.

A few cars drove by on the frontage road. Slushy snow sprayed in their wakes every time one passed.

A door opened and closed behind me. A moment later, Jacinda's energy reached me. It pulsed against my back in soft waves. She laid a hand on my shoulder.

"Are you okay?"

I didn't turn, but I nodded. Tears threatened to spill down my cheeks. I didn't know where these emotions came from. Maybe it was from the hellish experience I'd just escaped from. Maybe it was from lack of sleep. Heck, maybe I *was* pregnant and experiencing new hormones. Whatever its cause, it didn't matter, because what I *did* know was that we were returning to the one place I'd so desperately sought to escape.

"I'm scared," I replied honestly.

Her grip loosened on my shoulder and then long slender fingers closed over mine. She squeezed my hand tightly. "Me too."

We stayed outside, holding hands, as the giant Santa grinned and waved to passerbys. Neither of us said anything until Father, Di and Flint returned with the vehicles. Both were American SUV's with Ford logos blazing in their grills. Their large tires kicked up snow and slush when they parked in the lot. Di stepped out of the vehicle and called for everyone to get in.

Taking a deep breath, Jacinda and I collected the others before setting out into a future that suddenly seemed more precarious than any we'd faced before.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

When we drove to Marcus' estate, we didn't take back roads. Nor did we conceal our identities behind sunglasses and large hats. We were done hiding. If Marcus wanted us, he'd have to fight to get us.

Nervous, heightened energy permeated the cab—the way smoke consumes a burning house. At times, it made it hard to breathe. Now more than ever, I needed to call upon my ability to protect us. My foot tapped repeatedly against the floor. If Marcus still had that sound machine, we'd again be rendered useless.

But we didn't have a choice.

We couldn't wait to prepare. We needed to act now. Susannah's life may be in danger, and come what may, all of us were willing to fight to protect her.

Forest surrounded the sleepy, county road that bordered Marcus' property. Di stopped the vehicle twenty yards from the main gates. Father stopped the second vehicle just behind us.

Large, towering trees rose like unfolding umbrellas above, their bare skeleton branches naked in winter. Only a few days ago this very forest had hid me while Marcus' men combed the woods. Vivid images of flattening to the cold, dead earth while a spot light from a security vehicle shone from the road, filtered through my mind. A zing of terror ran down my spine.

The gates I'd blasted through just three days ago were already replaced. Shiny, new metal gleamed. Swiveling cameras at the top turned toward us. Two men flanked the gates, watching us suspiciously. One had a broken arm.

I cocked my head. That was new. There hadn't been security there when I busted out.

Flint tensed beside me, his energy increasing. Luke straightened too, growling as his eyes flickered to gold.

My gaze returned to the guy's broken arm. "Did you do that?" I asked Flint.

“Yeah, that bastard tried to take me down when they hauled you away.”

“Everyone stay together when we get out.” Di unclicked her seatbelt. “Without a rehearsed plan, we have nothing to fall back on other than our instincts. If something doesn’t seem right—react. And remember, our main priority is beating Marcus, then we can rescue Susannah.”

When we opened our doors and stepped onto the county road, one of the men reached for a walkie-talkie. Crackling static could be heard from the distance. Our slamming doors cut off the sound.

Di glanced my way. “Lena?”

I quickly gathered the energy inside of me. The fear swirling in my core made my energy grow. I then gathered the energy around us. Between our heightened states and the abundance of trees and wildlife, there was plenty to feed on.

The ball I formed was large and powerful. With careful precision, I descended it over the men. The one holding his walkie-talkie shrieked. Both were pushed flat to the ground. When that happened, the one with the broken arm screamed in pain.

Di raised an eyebrow. “Flint and Luke?”

They raced to the security men. A blow to each head and both men were unconscious.

“Tie them up.” Di pulled a bag of zipties from her back pocket and tossed the bag to them.

I shook my head. *Always prepared.*

A few minutes later, both men were passed out with ankles tied and arms bound behind their backs. Flint and Luke stowed them in the ditch, out of view. On the off chance anyone drove by, they’d have no idea that two men lay unconscious in the dead grass.

The twelve of us marched to the gates. Everyone’s energy was so high a headache threatened. I pulled up my reserves and created a protective bubble around me. I needed to stay focused.

The gates stood tall and menacing. Di eyed me again. “Lena?”

I gathered my energy and then called upon others. The trees responded, as if standing to attention that someone within their vicinity could feel their power. I summoned the giant oaks and evergreens, harnessing their great age and strength. Using their power, I manipulated my cloud subtly, winding it into the locking mechanism on the gate.

Similar to how I escaped, I molded my cloud to the lock. With a strong push, the bolt disengaged.

The gates swung open.

“Let’s go.” Di strode forward.

We fanned out, all of us assessing the yard and trees for movement. While speed was imperative, running blindly to Marcus’ home only meant we’d be oblivious to an attack.

Mica spotted the first guard. “He’s about eighty feet away and armed. He’s trying to hide behind trees while approaching us. He has a gun.”

Just then, he appeared around a distant oak, legs spread, arms raised.

Mica’s breath sucked in. “He’s got a tranquilizing gun!”

Everyone ducked behind landscaping or flattened to the ground. A swish of air sounded above. A tranquilizing dart impaled a tree on the other side of the road.

A shout sounded in the distance. More men came from scattered areas on the property. Each carried a similar weapon to the first guard. Stomping footsteps running through gravel sounded next.

“They’re going to try to capture us!” Jacinda shrieked.

My gaze frantically scanned our surroundings. Flint squatted three yards away behind a tree. Our eyes met a second before he disappeared. A moment later, Flint materialized at the first guard’s side. The guard screamed and dropped simultaneously, his scream caught in his throat when Flint knocked him out. I had no idea if the guard was dead, but I knew Flint would kill him to defend himself or our family.

And you’d do the same. Just remember to think before you act. Control yourself.

No regrets.

I closed my eyes just as Jasper and Jet closed theirs. Blood whooshed through my ears. My heart galloped in my chest.

I called upon the forest’s energy. Whizzing darts flew past me overhead.

Mentally, I reached out. The mens’ auras were closing in. There were five more of them. Each man’s cloud pulsed with rage, hate and glee. They were enjoying this.

Not today. Today, is not the day we get captured!

My teeth gritted together as I gathered their clouds but already I could feel the mens’ energy diminishing. The twins were manipulating them full

force.

I descended balls upon them, squashing each man to the ground. Flint's blurred figure suddenly appeared by the first one. He knocked him out. Luke growled and pushed up. He reached the second man just as Flint appeared beside the third. Together, they took down four and five.

When each was unconscious, I shakily stood. My brothers, sisters and Father did the same. Cloudy puffs of breath hovered around us. Everyone panted.

"That was close," Amber whispered.

Mica's brown eyes grew wide. "Too close."

"Where are the rest?" Di's sharp gaze darted around.

"Seven . . . or eight men are in the distance." Amber lifted her nose and sniffed. "I keep catching their scents on the breeze. They're still far away."

Luke joined our side. His eyes glowed golden. "They're on the other side of the property."

"They know we're here." Edgar's voice shook with fear. "The buggers are preparin' right now."

"How do you know that?" Amber inched closer to him.

"Luke in'it the only one with other traits, love."

I did a double take at Edgar. It was the first time he'd alluded to having more abilities, but of course, he had to. From the dozens and dozens of colors in his cloud it was impossible he didn't have enhanced characteristics. He simply never talked about them. Father had guessed it was another defense mechanism. It seemed Edgar wished to be a normal human.

Di nodded briskly. "Let's get a move on. It's only a matter of time before they find us."

When we reached the fountain in Marcus' drive, we stopped and faced the front door. We didn't have to wait long. The door opened. But instead of Marcus peeking out, it was Raven.

My breath stopped.

Flint and Di stiffened beside me.

I knew Raven could burn us alive if he wanted to. I hated to do it, but I readied an energy ball just in case.

"Lena!" Surprise was evident in Raven's voice.

"Hi, Raven."

He stepped onto the drive, leaving the door open behind him. He was barefoot. Di and Flint's energy picked up even more.

Raven's hair stood out on all ends, as if he'd been raking his hands through it all afternoon. His olive-toned skin looked as though he'd just been on a Caribbean cruise—tanned from days in the sun. His eyes, though, were uniquely him. They were visible even from the distance. They glowed brighter.

"I thought I was seeing things on the security camera." He shuffled from foot to foot.

I stiffened. "Is your dad here?"

He nodded. "He's calling extra security right now."

The energy in our group picked up even more. I diffused it around me. "How many men are coming?"

Raven's eyes darted from mine to Di and then Flint. Those fire filled irises glowed even brighter. "Um, there's twenty-five total on the property right now. He boosted security after you escaped."

"Seventeen more," I murmured. Hopefully those eight that had been knocked out behind us were still unconscious. Fear clawed my throat, making the next words stumble out. "Do they have that sound machine?"

Raven shook his head. "That was borrowed from a guy my dad knew in California. It's not here."

I breathed a sigh of relief.

However, Di and Flint's energy grew the more Raven and I spoke. Di shifted, the pebbles crunching under her shoes. "You're Raven?"

Raven nodded. "You must be Di." He glanced between her and Flint. "You do look like me."

Flint's energy quadrupled.

"Will you please tell your father to step outside to speak with us?" Father's diplomatic question seemed to break the spell.

"Um . . ." Raven murmured. He kept darting glances at Flint and Di.

"I have a better idea." Jet placed his feet wider apart and nudged Jasper. "How about we make him come out?" The twins closed their eyes.

I did the same and reached out with my mental arms, gathering and drawing the energy around us.

I found Susannah about two hundred yards away. She was still in eagle form and was watching everything that was going on. I wasn't sure if she was aware of me or not. Her eyes stayed focused on the house. I moved my

reach beyond her, to the surrounding roads and terrain where men could be coming from.

I sensed the seventeen other men. They were drawing closer. From their heightened energy, I knew they were coming to fight.

Marcus abruptly appeared behind Raven.

Raven's mouth dropped when his dad joined him on the gravel drive. A glazed look filled Marcus' eyes. The twins' ability strummed full force.

When Marcus stood only ten feet away, his eyes cleared before widening. The twins had released him.

Now, the negotiations begin.

Marcus glanced hurriedly around and seemed about to run, when Flint disappeared from my side, only to reappear behind Marcus. He grasped Marcus' arms and wrenched them behind his back.

Marcus howled in pain.

Raven took a step forward.

I gave Raven a desperate look, begging him to not interfere. Even though none of us wanted to hurt Raven, we'd be left with no choice if he intervened.

The shuffle of Marcus' feet on the pebbles slowly stilled as Flint held him in a steel-like grip. However, what I heard next was not what I expected.

Marcus laughed.

"So here they all are." His gaze traveled to each of us, one by one. When he settled on Father, something evil shone through Marcus' irises.

I switched my vision. Marcus' cloud appeared around him. It was worse than I remembered. Billowing like a pitch black menacing storm cloud, it pulsed and throbbed. It grew in diameter as he watched Father. That sight triggered a memory of me in O'Brien's warehouse. Marcus stood above me, his eyes filled with a sadistic gleam as he plunged a needle into my arm.

I snapped my vision back to normal. My heart pounded. I glanced away as my chest rose and fell.

Marcus' glacial words brought me back to the present. "Conroy, dear friend, it's been too long."

Father stiffened but met Marcus' gaze. "Enough is enough, Marcus. We're not going to hide anymore. We've come to negotiate with you."

“Negotiate?” Marcus’ breath puffed in clouds each time he spoke. In his perfectly tailored dress shirt, he must be freezing, but he didn’t seem to care. “What makes you think I’m going to negotiate?”

“I’m not sure you have a choice,” Father replied. “It seems we have the upper hand.”

Marcus laughed again. “Or you’ll do what? Kill me, Conroy? Please. We all know you don’t have it in you.”

Flint’s energy increased as he leaned down. “No, he may not, but *I* do.”

The threat didn’t seem to faze Marcus. “I’ve got my men on the way. As strong as you all *think* you are, your pathetic attempt at fighting last time showed me otherwise. They’ll be here any minute.”

“That may be a minute too late,” I replied.

Marcus’ head whipped toward me. His eyes narrowed. “Little, Galena. I wasn’t very happy with what you did the other night.”

“I’m sure you weren’t.”

A scream filled the air. Susannah circled above, her soaring form dominating the skies.

“Susannah.” Marcus’ teeth grated. A look of fury covered his face.

I darted a glance at Raven. He was staring at his dad with a shocked expression. It was as if Marcus had forgotten his son was there. Ugly, hate-filled words had flown from Marcus’ mouth. I could only hope that Raven was *finally* starting to see the man his father truly was.

The sound of tires on the drive broke the quiet. Three vehicles raced toward us.

“Ah, here they are.” Marcus smiled smugly.

His smug look made my breath catch in my throat. The vehicles skidded to a stop. They blocked our escape. Men jumped out with guns aimed at our faces. Fear coated every particle in my body. None of us could withstand a bullet or tranquilizing dart.

“Now,” Marcus said. “What were you saying about negotiating?”

My heart still lodged in my throat until some of the men lowered their weapons, wistful expressions on their faces.

The twins!

“Keep your weapons—” But Marcus didn’t get a chance to finish his sentence. Flint whipped him around so fast, a crunching sound filled the air. Marcus howled in pain.

I winced. I felt fairly certain Flint just broke his arm.

“Now would be the time to choose which side you’re on, brother!” Flint’s dark eyes bore into Raven’s.

Raven backed up to the door, a horrified expression on his face.

Another scream filled the sky. Susannah still circled above.

The twins’ gazes whipped up. One of Marcus’ men shook his head, as if shaking himself out of a trance. Wide eyed, the man looked around, a jagged scar on his cheek. *Heath.*

Heath lifted his weapon, aiming at Susannah.

“No!” I yelled. I ran toward him, lunging for his gun.

Heath’s gun went off. The loud boom echoed. Jacinda screamed. Another shot fired.

All at once, chaos ensued.

I launched a huge energy ball at the men. Heath was knocked off his feet.

A laugh caught my attention just as Marcus threw something on the gravel drive. During the chaos, Flint’s grip on him must have loosened.

Whatever Marcus threw hit the ground. A puff of vapor shot up from it. The cloud grew until it encircled all of us.

Coughing, I waved my hand, trying to get away from it, but I couldn’t. It was everywhere.

The guards coughed too, and then I felt it. The oily, awful drug swimming through my circulation. It started differently this time. Instead of the drug coating my veins, it started in my lungs.

My lungs burned. My chest ached.

With widening eyes, panic flooded my heart. I mentally reached for the area in my brain to flick the dormant switch that activated my ability.

Please, no, please don’t let it be the same drug!

I flicked the switch.

Nothing happened.

NO!

The word ripped through my conscience. We were human. Like anybody else. Our extrasensory abilities were gone. It was just like when I’d been captive. It was starting all over again.

I waited for unconsciousness to come. The dark, creeping blackness to close in on me.

It didn’t. I stayed upright, fully alert.

It's different yet the same. In the vaporized version, perhaps it doesn't cause unconsciousness.

As soon as the vaporized drug cleared, one of the guards lifted his gun. The loud boom as it went off cracked the sky.

Jacinda screamed before she fell. A tranquilizing dart stuck out of her arm. Her eyes widened before they turned glassy. Unseeing.

My heart exploded.

My brain refused to comprehend what just happened. My sister lay on the ground. Unmoving. Possibly not breathing.

Luke's roar filled the air. He flew at the man who shot her. His fist connected with the man's jaw before the guard knew what hit him.

The guard went down cold, his head hitting the ground.

Marcus laughed. His gleeful wrath filled the sky. The rest of my family moved blindly, flailing—confused expressions on their faces as the rest of the guards raised their weapons.

No one knows. No one knows but me what Marcus has done.

"We've lost our powers!" I screamed. I ran to my sister.

Another guard raised his gun, aiming at Luke.

Edgar whipped into action. He jumped as the gun went off. A tranquilizing dart hit Edgar square in the chest. Edgar was unconscious before he hit the ground.

I briefly saw Flint wrench Marcus' arm back again, except this time, a scream didn't follow. Flint stopped, looking bewildered. He tried again.

Marcus fought.

Flint grunted when Marcus nailed him in the shin with the back of his heel.

Shock again coated Flint's face.

I barely registered it as Marcus broke free. *I need to get to my sister.*

The rest of the guards kicked into action as if sensing the tides had turned.

They know. They know we're now twelve defenseless humans. We have no power. We have no extrasensory or animalistic abilities. We're like everyone else. Normal.

Human.

Chaos again broke out. The guards ran for Luke and Flint. They targeted the men first. The physically stronger ones.

I reached Jacinda's side and dove for her, skidding to a halt on my knees. Gravel cut through my jeans. Pain coursed up my legs. I grabbed her head. Thick blond hair threaded through my fingers.

"Sister!" I shook her.

Her eyes were glassy, unseeing.

"Jacinda! Wake up!" She lay limp in my arms. A sob choked me. I couldn't breathe.

Commotion and fighting sounded everywhere. It was like a fog. Thick. Oppressive. Heavy. It became like background noise. There, but I didn't hear it. My vision focused on my sister. I couldn't lose her yet I had no idea what they drugged her with. It was possibly a sedative or it could be worse.

It could be poison.

Tears streamed down my cheeks as rage boiled in my veins.

Another body fell to my side. Father.

He lay on the ground, not moving. Blood pooled by his head.

No!

I didn't realize Marcus had broken free and was running until I saw his retreating form. Marcus sprinted to the back of the house, toward the woods. His broken arm dangled at his side.

Everyone else was fighting.

Three men surrounded Flint. One on each arm while the third punched him in the face.

Raven stood only feet away. Horror had rendered him immobile.

"Raven!" I screamed the words as tears poured down my cheeks. "Raven, stop them!"

I staggered to my feet, going to Flint. A flower pot stood by the front door. A heavy, ceramic pot. Adrenaline infused strength into me. I lifted it as if it weighed nothing. The guard pulled back his fist. Flint fainted his head to the left just in time.

The guard howled in fury at his missed target.

And in that moment, I knew. I knew Flint was right. I wasn't a bad person. I wasn't evil. If my cloud wasn't colorful, it wouldn't be gray or black. It would be white.

I loved my family. I loved them enough to protect them. Even if meant hurting others to do that.

Lifting the flower pot, I ran at the guard as he pulled his fist back.

The two men holding Flint tried to shout a warning. They didn’t do it in time.

With a guttural cry, I slammed the pot down on the guard’s head.

He staggered and fell. Blood poured from a huge gash beside his ear. It trickled into the gravel, but I didn’t stop.

With wild movements, I flung the pot at another guard holding Flint. He let go of Flint just as the pot connected with his stomach. He doubled over, gasping.

More fighting sounded behind me. We were falling. One by one, but we weren’t giving up.

We wouldn’t go quietly.

Our entire lives we’d been pawns. Pawns in the game of O’Brien. Nobody more so than the three we rescued only weeks ago. They’d been subjected to more cruelty and inhumane treatment than any of us.

And I’d be damned if we died quietly.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Flint punched the remaining guard as another tranquilizing dart flew past. It landed just to the left of Raven and wedged into the brick wall.

I turned to assess the situation. Hair flew in front of my face. Father, Edgar, Jacinda and Amber all lay motionless on the ground.

Luke was fighting like a champion. He didn't seem as affected by Marcus' vaporized drug as the rest of us. *It must not be as strong.* It would explain why none of us were unconscious, but Luke didn't move as fast and he made no attempts to transform. *He probably can't.*

I whirled back around and raced to Flint. He caught me and pulled me to the ground as another dart flew past. It lodged into a bush only inches from my face.

"We need to get out of here!" Flint yelled.

"How?" I clung to his forearms.

Blood gushed down the side of Flint's face. One of his eyes was swollen shut. I'd never seen him hurt. Not like this. He'd always been so strong. So invincible.

"I . . . I can help . . ."

Raven's words carried to us in a breeze. For a moment, I hadn't known who'd said them.

Raven appeared at our side, hunkering down as we crouched in the gravel. He put a hand on my arm. His fingers shook.

"I can stop them."

I grabbed hold of his hand, my fingers turned white I gripped him so hard. "If you can stop them, Raven, then do it. Please, Raven! *Please!* They're going to kill us. They're going to kill my entire family!"

Sobs shook my chest. Dizziness made my vision swim. I knew I was going into shock. I took several deep breaths, holding Raven in a death grip.

Raven's eyes swirled, an orange, crimson red. An emotion so deep it seemed to sink to his toes swam in them. He glanced at Flint. Something in his eyes flickered brighter. An awareness. A knowing.

The brothers stared at one another. Flint's hand tightened on my thigh.

"Stop them," Flint said. "Please."

Raven stood just as a mocking chuckle reached my ears. "Looks like you didn't win after all, Red."

Heath stood only feet way. He held a gun. He didn't bother to raise it. The rest of my family was surrounded. My eyes widened when I saw the twins, Mica and Di all huddled together, the remaining guards surrounding them with their guns raised and pointed.

Heath laughed again. Trevor joined in. He stood near Mica, grinning.

"No." Raven stood straighter. "They *do* win."

Heath's head cocked in confusion just as a fire erupted at his feet. Heath staggered back.

The fire grew.

My eyes widened as flames erupted at all of the guards' feet. Howls of pain and fear followed.

My breathing increased as comprehension sank in. *Raven's immune to the drug. He didn't lose his powers. He's not like us. He's different. Stronger.*

Di, Mica and the twins jumped away from the burning men. Marcus' men flailed. Raven's flames only grew. All of them were burning alive. Raven watched everything happening, his body frozen, his expression resolute.

I didn't have time to assess anything else. Mica ran to me and yanked me in the direction Marcus had run. The twins had already begun chasing him. Flint still stood by Raven, watching his brother, his face unreadable.

"Go!" Di screamed. "Get Marcus. I'll help everyone else!" Already Di was leaning over Father, rapidly assessing the damage done. She next moved to Jacinda.

"We can't let him get away!" Mica yelled. "Come on, you guys!"

I finally kicked into action. Mica and I sprinted after Marcus. Flint followed a second later.

Marcus was almost to the woods by the time we rounded the corner. He wasn't moving fast across the acres of lawn. His broken arm dangled at his side. His other arm cradled it.

The twins were in hot pursuit, already halfway to him.

Marcus turned and raised his good arm to fight just as the twins reached him.

Jasper or Jet, I couldn’t be sure which one, ducked when Marcus swung. The other twin locked both arms around Marcus’ waist, tackling him to the ground.

A scream ripped from Marcus’ mouth when his shoulder hit the hard earth.

We all reached him seconds later. The five of us circled him, panting from the long sprint. Screams from the burning men still filled the air, but the sounds were dying one by one.

In the distance, the security team was falling to the ground. With a gagging realization, I realized they were dying. Trevor and Heath were among them.

When I turned back around, I expected to see fear in Marcus’ eyes, or at the very least, acceptance that this was over. Instead, he grinned and laughed. The sound was demented. My skin crawled.

“Do you really think this is the end of everything?” he yelled. He looked around our circle, eyeing all of us. “This isn’t the end! You don’t have the guts to end this!”

None of us responded.

Marcus laughed again, the sick sound filling the sky. “Do you know what I’m going to do to all of you?” he cried. “I’m going—”

Marcus’ eyes widened, his words seemed to catch in his throat. Another scream filled the air, deafening me since it was so loud.

An eagle scream.

Susannah appeared directly above us, her giant wings cupped as she descended. She screamed again. The sound was so loud it practically burst my ear drums.

The loud whoosh of Susannah’s wings breezed across my face as she landed on top of Marcus.

We all stepped back.

Marcus tried to fight. He raised his good arm and punched her in the chest.

It was no use.

Susannah had him where she wanted him, where she’d wanted him all along.

The last thing I saw was Marcus’ eyes widening in fear as Susannah’s enormous beak opened. She leaned down and with one giant rip—she tore his throat out.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

We all stood speechless as Susannah gave a giant flap of her wings. She ascended into the sky, her scream piercing the air as she climbed higher and higher.

What was left of Marcus lay in a bloody pile on the ground. His throat was torn open to the spinal column. She hadn't stopped there.

Both of Marcus' eyes were missing, and his face was clawed beyond recognition. Susannah had ripped his broken arm off after she'd finished with his neck and face. Following that, she'd torn open his belly until his still warm intestines spilled on the ground. Perforated bowel and its contents mixed with the tang of blood. Bile rose in my throat as I stared at the horrific display.

I knew the way Susannah had savagely ripped Marcus to pieces would stay with me until I died. All of Susannah's hate and rage at the man who'd controlled and abused her, throughout her entire life, lay in evidence on the ground. The blood, gore and smell that came with it were not something I'd easily forget. I could only hope this memory would fade.

The twins finally said something, after we all stared at Marcus' remains for a full minute or two.

"How the hell do we clean this up?" Jet's chest rose and fell heavily.

"I think I'm gonna be sick." Jasper turned and vomited in the grass.

I looked back in the sky. Susannah had vanished.

Flint took a deep breath as Jasper straightened. "Let's make sure everyone else is okay and then we'll figure out what to do."

We all turned silently, leaving the carnage behind. The air felt heavy as if ozone had descended from above.

It was surprisingly quiet as we walked back to the group, given what just transpired. Marcus obviously didn't have close neighbors. If anybody had heard the screams, they'd probably be wondering what was happening on the Christenson property. Perhaps those neighbors would call the police, but no sirens sounded. If anything, it was ironically peaceful. Wind blew

through the trees. Crunching frozen grass sounded under our feet. That was it. The screams and chaos were gone.

The smell of burnt flesh filled the air back at the house. Marcus' men all lay dead on the ground. Father sat upright beside Di, rubbing his head. Dried blood matted his face and hair. Jacinda, Amber and Edgar still lay unmoving.

A sob squeezed my chest. "Are they . . ."

"They're alive." Di stood from where she crouched beside Father. "Unconscious but alive."

The breath rushed out of me. I nearly fell but Flint caught me.

Father rubbed his head. A goose egg had formed on it. It appeared he'd been knocked out, not tranquilized. "They'll be fine." His calm words helped slow my breathing even more.

I clung to Flint with a desperation I'd never felt before. I thought I'd lost my sister. I thought she'd died. Tears poured down my cheeks when I realized she hadn't.

Father shakily stood. "It will probably be a few hours before they wake, but they'll be okay."

Luke hunkered by Jacinda, his golden eyes rimmed with an emotion I'd never seen in them before. He picked her up, Jacinda's limp form lying in his arms. "Let's take them inside."

Raven stood silently, hovering away from the group. He stared at the men's remains on the ground.

Di approached him before I could kick myself into action. "Did you know any of them?"

Raven didn't respond. His face was expressionless, his eyes glazed.

She stepped closer and had to ask the question again before he looked up.

"Oh, um yeah, a few of them."

Di and Raven almost stood at eye level, although Raven was an inch or two taller.

"You did the right thing." She placed her hand on his arm.

Raven's irises blazed. "I killed them, all of them." His words came out choked.

"And if you hadn't, we could all be dead." Di clasped Raven's hand. She squeezed it tightly.

The twins and Flint picked up Edgar and Amber. A cold winter breeze whipped around us. All of us followed Raven inside, Di leading him.

“What happened to Marcus?” Luke asked when the door closed behind us. His light-brown hair looked windblown while his eyes flickered that golden color. He still held my sister. It didn’t seem he had any intention of letting her go.

“Susannah killed him.” I didn’t go into the gory details.

Father took a deep, unsteady breath and glanced around the impressive foyer. “How many people are in the house right now, Raven?”

Di nudged him when he didn’t respond. “How many people are on the property, Raven?”

Raven finally seemed to hear them. “Um, one, our housekeeper, Cecile.” He shook his head. “No, wait. She went grocery shopping. She needed a few more things for our Christmas Eve dinner tonight.”

Father nodded. “So she’s not in the house? And nobody else is either?”

“No, nobody else is here. The rest of the people who work on our estate are all . . .” He took a deep unsteady breath, his eyes flicking to the window, showing the scene on the pebbled driveway.

“You’re sure?” Father grimaced in pain. He rubbed his head.

Raven nodded. Shock still coated his face but at least he seemed more coherent. “Yes, the cleaners come on Mondays only. During the rest of the week, it’s just Cecile. She works morning till evening from Monday through Friday and leaves after she prepares the supper meal each night.”

“Do you know how to reach her?” Father asked.

“I could call her cell phone.”

“You need to call her and tell her to not come back today.” Father stepped closer to him. “Do whatever you need to do to stop her. We need to clean this up and wipe any trace of our being here before she returns.”

The blood drained from Raven’s face. The dazed look returned.

“Come on.” Di tugged him. “I’ll help you.”

THE REST OF the day passed in a blur. Cleaning up dead bodies, destroying all security footage that contained images of us, and raiding Marcus’ home office to eliminate all of the notes containing any trace of our existence wasn’t easy.

It was hard. Freakin’ hard.

A number of times I gagged or swallowed bile that wanted to rise. I kept remembering Susannah ripping into Marcus' flesh. The memories of bone crunching, flesh tearing and the smells that came along with it kept haunting me.

Flint stayed by my side as we worked together. The two of us cleaned up Marcus. Putting bloody remains into garbage bags was almost surreal. After that, we burned the ground where Susannah had killed him. Flint felt confident the fire would destroy any evidence. However, it would obviously still draw attention. If anyone ventured to that part of the lawn, they'd see a charred spot, but if the police never found Marcus' body and had no evidence he'd been killed, it wouldn't be easy to declare him deceased. Snow would hopefully cover the bald patch soon.

Thankfully, since it was winter, the gardeners who frequented the property during the summer months were all off until spring. Raven said at this time of year, it was only Cecile who worked regular hours. With any luck, nobody would see anything remiss for months.

When we returned to the ditch to retrieve the first two security men, my mouth dropped. I expected to find two unconscious guards. However, only charred human remains greeted us. The stench made me want to vomit.

"No freakin' way," Jet breathed.

The twins, Flint and I stared at the ashy substance. Mica had stayed behind to monitor Amber, Jacinda and Edgar. None of them had woken up yet.

I covered my mouth. "Apparently when Raven started the men in the drive on fire, he started these guys on fire too."

Jasper nodded, his face stricken. "It's like his fires knew who his mind targeted."

We hurriedly rushed to the other six men we'd left unconscious in zipties—the ones we'd encountered when we'd first entered the property. All of them had burned.

I shuddered. Raven was incredibly powerful.

Since Raven's fires burned so intensely, only ash remained of the entire security team. With shaking hands, we shoveled the ash into bags. My stomach churned the entire time.

When finished, we took what remained of the men to the woods. Flint did most of the carrying. His strength was slowly returning, convincing me

the vaporized version of Marcus' drug wasn't nearly as powerful as the injectable kind. Within thirty minutes, Flint had a huge hole dug in the forest. He zoomed back to the house to retrieve Raven. On shaky limbs, Raven stumbled into the woods with Flint at his side.

"You need to burn that bag. Completely." Flint pointed to the bag with Marcus' remains. We'd thrown it into the bottom of the hole.

We didn't tell Raven what was in it, but I guessed Raven figured it out from the haunted expression that coated his gaze.

After Marcus' body was thoroughly burned, Raven returned to the house while the rest of us piled the remaining garbage bags with the ashy cremated guards into the hole. We all picked up the shovels we'd found in the gardener's shed and began to cover them with dirt.

Only forest sounds filled the air while we worked. None of us said anything, our movements mechanical. With one last shovel of dirt, the hole was filled. All of us stared at the mounded soil.

The twins took their hats off. Flint murmured a prayer. All of us paid our respects to a grave that would never be marked. It didn't matter that these men were evil. It didn't matter that they'd tried to capture us. They were still people who deserved better than what we'd done.

I knew no trace of Marcus or any of his security team would ever be found. Guilt pummeled me as we walked back to the mansion. Even if all of those men were as evil as Trevor and Heath, was that really how they deserved to die? Did any of those men have families? Children? Would anyone miss them?

I could only hope the answer was no, but deep down, I knew it wasn't. Each of those men had been a son, maybe a brother, father or uncle. Someone would grieve for them. Someone would miss them. Somewhere a person would go on existing with a hole in their heart, always wondering what happened to the loved one they'd lost. That realization left a deep aching sadness in my chest.

Back at the house, the four of us fell onto the couches while Di and Father continued to handle the security footage since they were the most meticulous. Just one screen shot of us, and we'd be suspects. We knew the police already had screen shots of us from the warehouse incident in Chicago. They'd no doubt put the pieces together and realize that event and this one were connected. It was bad enough we'd spent our lives on the run from Marcus. The last thing we wanted was to run from the police too.

I watched Raven a few times throughout the afternoon and evening. He worked alongside Di and Father. Since Raven had grown up in this house, he knew it inside and out, including the hiding places where Marcus stored things. He showed Di and Father everything. But while he answered all of their questions, the dazed look remained.

It hadn't improved by the time the sun set. His movements stayed mechanical, and his eyes perpetually blazed, but he kept going.

It wasn't until Father uncovered some computer files that contained research data from twenty years ago that Raven fell to the floor. It was as though until that moment, he was able to tell himself that everything that had transpired was all a bad dream, that he hadn't killed twenty-five men, that his dad wasn't a murderer, that Marcus hadn't done all of those things I'd claimed before.

After that, it was as if Raven slowly put the pieces of the puzzle that was his life together. When Raven randomly declared that Marcus would sometimes disappear for weeks or occasionally months at a time, he suggested it might have been related to Project Renatus. We all agreed. Raven next said that those times when Marcus had left without telling him how long he'd be gone, were most likely to study the lost children. We agreed with that too.

In a way, those disappearances worked to our advantage. If it wasn't unusual for Marcus to disappear, then it wouldn't be unreasonable to tell Cecile that she wasn't needed for a few months. She was our last loose end. If she returned to the mansion and nobody was here, eventually she'd call the police, inevitably filing a missing person report.

Raven's hands shook when he picked up his phone to call the housekeeper for a second time.

Di grasped his shaky palm, her dark eyes intense. "We're here. You're not alone."

Raven swallowed audibly before forcing a greeting when Cecile picked up his call.

I listened to the conversation, Flint at my side. Raven managed to sound normal enough, but we all knew better. Cecile wouldn't see his shaking palms or the sweat beaded on his forehead. She wouldn't know that he had to sit down when explaining she wouldn't be needed until spring.

"We'll still pay you. Consider it a Christmas bonus." Raven's eyes blazed.

Di squeezed his hand again. She crouched at his side, her hand on his thigh, nodding encouragingly every time he seemed about to falter.

Raven's eyes glowed brighter as he listened to the housekeeper. "I know, yeah, it's great that you can finally take that trip to see your family." He paused again. "Yeah, Merry Christmas to you too, Cecile. I'll call you . . . or my dad will . . . when we get back."

Di squeezed his hand again when he hung up.

Raven's head dropped. His phone clattered to the floor.

He didn't seem relieved that not having Cecile on the property nearly guaranteed that nobody would know what happened here. Even if she returned early, snow would still cover the ground, hiding any evidence of what we'd done.

"It's going to be okay." Di put an arm around his shoulders. "You'll see." She helped him stand and led him away. Seeing Di act so caring and compassionate tugged at my heart. It was as if she *knew* that Raven was hers. That he was the baby brother she'd never had.

As for the security men that now lay buried in the forest, Raven didn't know any of them well enough to truly know their identities. They were just the security guys—the men employed by Marcus who worked on the estate and traveled to do what Marcus expected of them. We had no idea if they had families or people who would look for them. Only time would tell.

We worked well into the night. By the time we finished with everything, it was the early hours of Christmas morning. I was bone tired. The last week had carried more fears and adrenaline rushes than I ever wanted to experience in the rest of my life. The only solace I took was knowing that Marcus was finally finished. He couldn't hurt me or my family again.

However, there was still one person out there who knew about us. Albert Darlington—the third Project Renatus researcher. And we had no idea what he would do.

CHAPTER THIRTY

We flew back to Canada on Christmas Day. Jacinda, Amber and Edgar had finally woken up in the early hours of Christmas morning. All complained of pounding headaches, but other than that, they all seemed fine.

Father didn't stay with us when we landed in Edmonton. He took off again as soon as we stepped onto the tarmac, telling us he'd find Albert and wouldn't return until everything was resolved.

I hugged him tightly. "What are you going to tell him?"

"I'm going to use one of the oldest tricks in the book. Blackmail. I've been steadily collecting information on Albert and Marcus for the past fifteen years. I knew a day like this may come, and while I don't think blackmail would have effectively worked on Marcus, on Albert, it's a different story. I'm fairly certain he'd rather negotiate and quietly end this now."

His familiar scent of soap and mint filled my nose. I didn't want to think of never smelling that again. "Then why did you think we could negotiate with Marcus when we confronted him in his driveway?"

"I didn't." Father shrugged sadly. "But I was willing to try."

I gripped him again in a tight hug. Tears formed in my eyes. "Be careful and come home safe."

He hugged me back. "I will."

Di and he spoke quietly while the rest of us drifted through Customs. From there, we walked to the parking lot and waited. Di joined us a while later and we all got in the trucks. It was hard to believe barely a day had passed since we parked them. Who would have thought that our search for Susannah would have ended like it did.

My heart clenched again as I thought about our missing family member. Nobody had seen her. We had no idea where Susannah was. I could only hope she was safe.

When Flint slid into the driver's seat of one truck, Raven climbed into the passenger's side. I watched from the backseat. Every now and then, the brothers would look at each other, as if still unsure of what to do or say to the other. Each had a hand rested on a thigh.

I stared at them. Their hands were identical.

We returned to the Canadian mountain home as the sun was setting. I was so tired, I didn't care that my stomach rumbled or that it had been two days since I'd showered and that ashy human remains still clung to my clothes. Amber and Edgar volunteered to make a quick supper of sandwiches and canned soup. Someone turned on the radio. Christmas tunes filled the air.

We all ate in silence before retreating to our individual rooms. It definitely wasn't a joyful Christmas, but it would be the most memorable one we'd ever had.

I led Raven to the last open bedroom. He'd brought a few bags of clothes and things with him. When he sat down on the bed and let the bags fall at his sides, his eyes filled with tears.

"He's dead, Lena. He's really dead." A sob shook his chest.

It was the first time he'd spoken so openly about all that transpired. I knew sooner or later this would come. Even though we all thought Marcus was a demented mad man, which in reality he was, he was still Raven's father. He had been the only person Raven had ever known as family.

I sat beside him, the mattress sinking under my weight. "I'm sorry." I clasped his hand.

He squeezed it back before falling against my shoulder. I moved my arm around his shoulders and held him as he cried.

My heart broke for him as rivers of tormented energy rolled off him. It was so heavy, it threatened to crush the breath right out of me.

"I'm sorry, Raven," I said over and over again. "I'm so sorry it ended like that."

We sat together for a long time. I felt Flint's energy in the hall. It was questioning and concerned, but when he cracked the door open and saw Raven crying in my arms, he gave a silent nod and backed out.

I held Raven until his tears ran dry. When he finally pulled back, he sniffed and wiped his eyes. The contacts he'd worn through Customs were still in. With the brown lenses, he looked even more like Flint. I thought

briefly about the strand of his hair that I'd put in the dresser, or at least, I think it was the dresser.

We'd intended to DNA check it against Flint and Di. Now, that wasn't necessary. Raven was here. He was part of our family now. None of us needed a DNA check. We knew. He was their sibling, whether it be by blood or by choice, he was now a brother to all of us.

I'd heard once that family was simply who you said they were. That it didn't matter how long you knew one another. That it didn't matter if you were related or not. All that mattered was that if you declared it so—it was.

That was us.

The eleven of us shared something nobody else could ever understand. Locked together from sinister beginnings that had stolen us from horrific homes, we were as bonded as siblings could be. Nobody else would ever know what we'd been through. No one else had ever experienced the horrors of experimental drugs or imprisonment, but we'd come out of it alive, stronger and as one.

I knew we'd be a family until the day we died.

A tapping sound came from the window as Raven and I sat together. He wiped his eyes and reached for a tissue. The tapping increased. I figured it was a tree brushing against the window, but when Raven's breath sucked in, my eyes flew to the glass.

Susannah's giant form perched on a branch, just outside the window. She cocked her head. In the moonlight, her shadowy figure looked huge and menacing.

I raced to her. The double hung protested against the cold. It had almost frozen shut. I pushed until it opened. Cold air blew in.

"Hey, Susannah." I grinned. I couldn't help it. I was so relieved that she was okay.

She watched me with those large, yellow eagle eyes.

"Are you going to come in?"

She screamed. The sound pierced the nighttime quiet.

I winced.

Footsteps sounded in the hallway. I knew the others had heard too.

Raven joined me at the window. When he hunkered beside me, Susannah gave an unsettled movement, her wings rising and falling as she inched back on the branch.

"You don't need to be scared of him. He's one of us now."

She stopped moving backward just as everyone else barreled through the door. The twins and women grinned, while Edgar and Luke joined us at the window.

“Suzie, love!” Edgar exclaimed. “What you fink ‘ur doin’ out there? Come on in for a cuppa. It’s bloody cold, love.”

Susannah cocked her head between Edgar and Raven. I didn’t know eagle body language, but she still seemed unsure.

“Please come inside.” I reached out. I couldn’t be sure, but I got the feeling it was Raven that was holding her back. She kept eyeing him, her movements uneasy.

I opened the window fully and held out my hand. “Come on, Susannah. Come in.”

Luke jumped to my side and threw a blanket over his forearm. “She’ll shred your arm, Lena. Here, let me help her in.”

I moved to the side as Luke extended a huge, muscled arm covered in a blanket out to the tree. He crooned calming, nonsensical things.

Susannah hesitantly reached one sharply taloned foot out, then the other.

With a bit of finagling, we got her inside. It wasn’t easy to maneuver her huge form through the window, but Luke somehow managed. He took her straight to the adjoining bathroom, but not before I saw the blood stained feathers surrounding her head and beak. Marcus’ blood. Luke deposited her on the bathroom floor before coming back in the bedroom and closing the door behind him.

“She’ll take a minute.”

A few grunts, cracking bone and fleshy ripples ensued from the bathroom. I swallowed uneasily, but sure enough, just as Luke promised, the door to the bathroom opened a minute later.

The movement was slow and hesitant. When Susannah peeked out, we all waved her forward. She emerged wrapped in a towel, her skin as white as snow while her black hair tumbled in snarly waves down her back. Her blue eyes were wide and wary. The blood had vanished. Her face shone clean. I wondered if she’d washed her face, or if the blood went to wherever her feathers had retreated.

I knew the crowd scared her, and even though we were in Raven’s room, I shooed everyone out, including him. “Just give us a minute.”

Luke and Edgar seemed to understand more than anyone that Susannah was spooked. They both made a comment about everyone going back to their rooms or downstairs. Edgar said they'd go to the kitchen to fix Susannah something to eat.

I nodded. "Good idea."

Susannah looked even thinner than before. Bones protruded from her knees and elbows. Her collarbones jutted out prominently. It seemed the cross country flight, two days in a row, had taken a toll on her. I wondered if she'd eaten at all in the past forty-eight hours.

When it was just me and her in the room, I sat on the bed. "Are you okay?"

She still stood by the bathroom, looking wary.

I patted the bed beside me. "Want to sit with me?"

With hesitant steps, she walked forward and sat over two feet away, just on the edge of the bed. The mattress barely dipped under her weight.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

I guessed what she'd done to Marcus was still fresh in her mind. Or maybe it wasn't. Maybe she didn't remember anything she did in eagle form.

"Is he mad at me?" she finally asked.

I frowned. "Is who mad at you?"

"That guy. The one who lived at the house with Marcus." Her eyes flashed yellow when she said Marcus' name before morphing back to blue.

"Oh." Understanding dawned on me. "Um, I don't know."

"I don't regret killing him. I'd do it again."

I guessed that answered my question about whether or not she remembered things. "I don't regret it either."

She looked up sharply, hope filling her wide eyes. "You don't?"

"No. He needed to die. It was the only way. We'd never be safe as long as he was alive."

She licked her lips. Her tongue looked incredibly dry. "So nobody's mad at me? None of you?"

I shook my head. "I think I can speak for everyone when I say that we're glad it's over. Marcus can't hurt us again."

"And that guy?"

"Raven?"

"So he's not mad at me either?"

“I’m not sure about him, but I don’t think he blames you.”

A bit of color returned to her cheeks, and a small smile emerged. “So I can still stay here? When I’m not flying?”

“Of course you can.” It hit me that Susannah thought she may no longer be welcome. “You’ll always be part of our family, Susannah. Nothing will change that.”

“I won’t be punished?”

My heart sank at her surprised tone. Her entire life she’d been punished for acting violently toward the one man who’d caused her more harm and pain than any other. Even now, miles away from Marcus’ remains, she still thought there’d be repercussions. “No, Susannah. You won’t be punished for what you did. Just don’t hurt anyone else now that Marcus is dead.”

Her eyes widened. She frantically shook her head. “I would never hurt anyone else. Only him.” Her lips thinned, her eyes flashing yellow again. “I’ve only ever wanted to hurt him.”

Ultimately, I didn’t regret his death either. Marcus had hurt and killed so many people over the years. The world was truly a better place without him. And I knew now that thinking that didn’t make me a bad person. I would have never sought Marcus out to kill him, but I agreed with Flint. Defending my family came first. I knew that now.

“You must be hungry.”

She nodded.

“Come on, let’s get you some clothes and then go downstairs and see what Edgar and Luke made for you.”

She stood and we walked to the door. As I reached for the handle, I felt cool fingers brush against my free hand. I looked down. Her small hand clasped mine. My chest tightened with emotion.

I looked up and met her gaze. A questioning uncertainty swirled in her blue irises. Smiling, I gripped her hand tightly, and together we walked from the room.

THE NEXT DAY we all slept in and lounged around the house. Now that the ordeal with Marcus was finally over, the energy levels in the house grew subdued. It helped that it was Boxing Day. With the crazy shopping that went on during this day, none of us wanted to venture out. It made spending all day on the couch even easier.

The huge wall of windows in the main living area made it feel as if we were living in a snow globe. It was hard to not stop and stare. The snow falling outside pulled at my soul, begging me to relax. I spent most of the day on the couch.

Father called early afternoon to let us know he was back in Chicago and okay. Apparently, he and Albert were in “negotiations.” Whatever that meant. I tried not to think about it since Albert was the last person who could make our lives a living hell. One thing I did know was that nothing had sprouted up on the news about what we’d done to Marcus and his security team. I could only hope it stayed that way.

Flint lounged on the couch beside me as we gazed outside. The sun was hidden under a dense cloud cover as snow swirled in the air. I laid my head against his shoulder and smiled. The dark stubble and tired look in his eyes were gone. A long night of holding each other close had made both of us sleep well.

“Do you know where Susannah is?” He stretched.

“She went out flying again.”

“But she’s coming back?”

“Yeah. I think she’s going to be fine.” I summed up what she’d told me last night. “She’s still going to need help from Father, or me, or Luke or Edgar, or someone, but she’s doing better. I think the biggest thing she was afraid of was whether or not we’d still accept her after what she did.”

Flint grunted. “Accept her? Hell, I want to thank her.”

“I know. I’m glad he’s dead too.”

“We all are.”

We sat together quietly on the couch, the fire crackling in the hearth. Noise came from the second floor. A few of the others were watching a movie in the upstairs living area.

“Did Susannah talk to you again this morning?” Flint threaded his hand through my hair.

“Yeah. She let me know she was going out to fly before she left.”

“That’s an improvement since she normally just disappears.”

“I think she’s starting to trust me.”

He chuckled. “She obviously has good sense.”

We were sitting like that, just aimlessly chatting and watching the snow when Raven walked in the room. I sensed the shift in energy. Both men’s clouds doubled in size.

“Hi.” Raven shoved his hands in his pockets.

I smiled warmly. “Hey, how are you? Come sit with us.” I sat up straighter to make room.

Flint tensed. I knew his jury was still out on Raven. The fact that his younger brother hadn’t helped me escape from Marcus’ home, and that Raven had allowed me to remain captive, wasn’t leaving Flint’s memory anytime soon.

Raven sat stiffly beside me. He hovered on the edge of the couch, looking as if he’d jump up and disappear at any second.

“Did you get settled in?” I asked.

“Yeah.” Raven spoke hesitantly. “Only having two bags to unpack doesn’t take long.”

“But you’re feeling more comfortable? With everyone else?” I knew his childhood had been the exact opposite of ours. Whereas we’d grown up in the clutter of a constantly crowded household, he’d grown up wandering around a mansion with only himself for company.

“Yeah.” He cleared his throat. His eyes glowed.

I knew he was dealing with a lot right now: leaving his home, his father dying, him being the one who killed twenty-five men, and now being thrust into a strange country in the middle of nowhere while living with a group of people he barely knew. It couldn’t be easy.

“Do you want to go for a walk outside?” I asked.

A look a huge relief crossed his face. “Yes.”

I nudged Flint. “Do you want to join us?”

Flint tensed and eyed Raven. A moment of silence passed. I could practically cut the tension. “Okay,” he finally said.

The three of us pulled on winter coats and boots. Since I once again was without a jacket, I borrowed Amber’s. I made a mental note to go into town the next day to buy *another* one.

“Ready?” I pulled on Jacinda’s mittens.

We closed the door behind us and tramped through the snow. Cool mountain air enveloped us. I closed my eyes, savoring it. The quietness and feel reminded me so much of our home in the Forbidden Hills that a sense of peace settled in my chest.

“Which way should we go?” Raven tugged at his hat nervously.

“There’s a stream down that way.” Flint pointed downhill. “It’s easy walking beside it. The snow isn’t as deep.”

I raised an eyebrow at him. “And you know this how?”

“The twins. They explored the area the first few days after they got here, when you were still imprisoned.”

We set off down the hill with Flint in the lead. Every now and then, he’d glance over his shoulder to make sure we kept up. I knew he was always conscious of keeping his speed in check, but at times like this, when nobody was watching and there were no prying eyes, he’d sometimes forget and before I knew it, I was practically running to keep up.

Raven breathed heavily from behind me. The mountainous region was much higher in altitude than where he’d grown up outside Chicago. He kept up with the firm pace Flint set, however, not once complaining when we traversed through deep snow.

The sound of trickling water reached my ears. A small stream, no more than a few feet in width, greeted us at the bottom on an incline.

Frozen sections lined the water’s edge, icicles dripping from the banks. “How pretty.” I spotted a few boulders a little ways up the stream. “Do you guys want to sit over there?”

Raven shrugged. “Sure.”

Flint just eyed Raven again, the wary look still there, before he turned and walked toward the boulders.

Once we were all seated, a moment of awkward silence passed. Flint was in his “ignore” state, which I knew all too well from our summertime meeting at Hideaway Hills, before we’d known who we were. Raven, on the other hand, looked about as comfortable as someone being told the IRS would be auditing their taxes.

I plucked my hands under my thighs and tried to warm them. It was ridiculously cold sitting on the frigid rock but neither guy seemed to mind. Raven, however, noticed my shivering.

“Cold?”

I nodded.

Before I could say anything else, a huge fire appeared in front of us. I jumped and then smiled sheepishly. Once again, his fire didn’t burn anything but it still poured out heat. I took off my mittens before holding my hands up.

“Thanks.”

Flint’s energy lessened a bit. I knew my smiling at Raven and not feeling any angst toward him helped. It was my hope that if Flint saw that I

didn’t hold Raven responsible for my capture and imprisonment, then hopefully he wouldn’t either.

“So what was it like, growing up in Chicago?” I rubbed my hands a few times. My fingertips warmed.

Raven shrugged. His eyes glowed again. “I didn’t go into the city very much. I never had contact lenses, so I always had to wear sunglasses. At nighttime that looks a little weird, and my dad, um, I mean Marcus, didn’t like when I left the house.”

Flint shifted in his seat. His eyes stayed on the fire. “You didn’t go to school?”

Raven shook his head. “I was home schooled.”

I grinned. “So were we.”

“By Conroy?” Raven’s breath puffed in a cloud.

I nodded and explained our schooling system, how it involved actual courses and Real Life classes.

“So you spent your entire childhood in that cabin in Colorado?” His eyes widened.

“Yep.”

“I can’t imagine what that’d be like.” Raven shook his head. “And I thought my upbringing was isolated.”

“See, we’re not that different.” If I’d been closer, I would have nudged him.

A slow smile spread across Raven’s face.

We all kept talking, and I asked Raven more and more questions. He slowly seemed more comfortable and began to open up. When Flint also seemed curious and initiated a few questions of his own, I got up and told them I was going back to the house to use the bathroom. I knew Flint was getting more curious about his brother when he didn’t insist on accompanying me.

I followed our tracks back to the house. I had no intention of returning to the stream, but neither Flint nor Raven knew that.

“Hey.” Jacinda glanced up when I walked into the living room. She and Luke sat on the couch. It didn’t escape my notice that Jacinda was practically sitting in his lap. She inched off Luke’s thighs when I walked to the kitchen counter to make a late lunch.

Luke glanced in my direction. “Where have you been?”

“Flint, Raven and I went for a walk.”

Luke looked down the hall. “Didn’t they come back with you?”

I tucked a long strand of red hair behind my ear. “They’re still at the stream, talking.”

Jacinda raised an eyebrow. “Flint’s *talking* to Raven?”

Apparently, I wasn’t the only one who’d picked up on Flint’s accusatory feelings toward our newest member. “Yep.” I unscrewed the mayo and put a huge dollop on a slice of bread before adding lunch meat and cheese.

Jacinda leaned back against the couch. “That’s good to hear.”

I grinned. “Yes, it is.”

FLINT AND RAVEN returned to the cabin three hours later. I watched them through the window. They walked side by side through the snow as the setting sun glowed against their backs.

I couldn’t hear what they were talking about. I simply watched them as they got closer. They walked slowly, almost reluctantly to the door. When they stepped inside and stomped their boots, I poked my head into the entryway.

“Have a nice time?”

Flint’s head shot up. His chestnut hair was ruffled from his hat. He looked incredibly sexy. “I thought you only had to go to the bathroom.”

I shrugged. “I got hungry and it was warm in here.”

Raven smiled. I was happy to see he looked relaxed. His eyes were a muted orange, no fiery blazes. “I could have cranked the heat up for you.”

“You can change the temps on your fires?”

He nodded.

“I’ll keep that in mind for next time.”

Footsteps sounded on the stairs. Black yoga pants came into view. Di was smiling when she bounded into the foyer. My eyes widened. Di was smiling and bounding. Each of those things was cause for question. Something was definitely up.

“Are you okay?”

She grinned. “Yes! I just had a vision. Everything’s going to be fine. We’re not hiding or running anymore! We’re just normal people, like everyone else!”

She turned to Flint and stopped short when she saw Raven. The three siblings, standing beside one another, looked like they could be triplets. I

couldn’t believe I’d ever thought Di and Flint were dating when I first “met” them a few months ago. It was so obvious they were related.

“That’s good.” Raven stood between Di and Flint. He shuffled his feet, his head dipped.

Di glanced his way. “You and I were living together, Raven. Like a real family.”

I knew she meant blood family. My heart warmed when I watched Raven swallow, his fire-lit eyes misting over. “Together?”

She nodded.

I walked to Flint and put my arm around him. He squeezed me tightly. And in that moment, I knew everything was going to be okay.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

I buried my toes in the sand. Waves from the ocean lapped the shore while the sun warmed my skin. I'd never seen water so clear. The tropical waters were warm and translucent aqua. Farther out, they morphed into dark blue. It was hard to believe it was only a week after Christmas. This was completely opposite to the snowy, cold Canadian province we'd left three days ago.

Flint and I went snorkeling yesterday. That was a first for both of us. We held hands, our bodies floating in the warm Caribbean water while we stared at the real life aquarium swimming beneath us. I'd never seen so many colorful fish and sea life in such a concentrated area.

Clinking from ice in a glass sounded as Flint sat down in the sand beside me. A long, tanned forearm reached out. "Here you go."

I took the pink and yellow drink from him. It was in a tall glass with a skewer of oranges and cherries impaled by a turquoise umbrella.

I laughed. "Where'd you get the umbrella?"

Flint shrugged. "The bar in our bungalow has everything you could ever need."

I sipped from the straw. The fruity sweet beverage tasted crisp and fresh. It was the perfect beach drink.

Flint leaned back in the sand on his elbows. His unbuttoned shirt spread open. Sand dotted his pectorals which were deeply tanned and incredibly sexy in the tropical sun. He caught me watching him. "Like what you see?"

I grinned. "You know it."

Just before Greg flew us to the island, I got my period. It was a bittersweet ending to all that had unfolded. Flint and I had both felt relieved that a pregnancy never happened. As much as we loved each other and planned to stay together for the rest of our lives, neither of us was ready to start a family. We were too young. We had too much we wanted to do.

There was time for that in the future, but for right now, we both wanted many childless years to come.

He took the drink out of my hand and placed it on the small table at my side before crushing me beneath him. I spread my legs, allowing him better access.

The private beach and villa we'd rented sat on a small island in the Caribbean. We were only three days into our month long vacation, just the two of us. Finally, we were taking the trip we'd been talking about for weeks.

When he pulled back, I was breathless. "How long have we waited for this?"

"Too long," he growled.

"I can't believe I said only a month. I should have said a year."

He chuckled and then in a lightning fast move he was walking back to the villa with me in his arms. He carried me from the beach up the walkway to the huge king sized bed. Fresh sea air whipped through the interior. The glass wall of accordion style windows, that made up one wall in the villa, was entirely open. Salty, fresh ocean air whipped through the bedroom. It felt as though the room was outside.

Flint splayed me across the bed before landing on top of me. I laughed when the mattress made us both bounce. His eyes darkened. Reaching a finger up, he pushed hair out of my face.

"I've waited for so long to have you like this."

I thought of the months and years we'd dreamed of being normal, of not having to hide, of having a life of our own, of traveling. Now, we were finally living it.

His deep voice rumbled. "I love you. More than life itself." His dark gaze filled with emotion.

My heart clenched. I tenderly ran a finger along his cheek. His eyes darkened even more. Heat filled my core. "I'll love you forever," I breathed. The bracelet he'd given me on my eighteenth birthday slid down my arm when I wrapped my hand around his neck.

"It's funny." He moved down to kiss the side of my neck.

"What's funny?" I could barely concentrate. His tongue did amazing things.

"In a way, I feel like we've been given a new life. That this is the life we were always meant to have. Free, together, our family safe."

I nodded as he pushed up. I tried to pull him closer, but he stayed on his forearms. Deep emotion blazed in his irises. “It’s as if we’ve been reborn. Like we’ve got a chance to start anew.”

I shimmied out of my top and pulled him onto my naked breasts. “And there’s only one person I want to start that new life with.”

EPILOGUE

One Year Later

I handed another string of Christmas lights to Luke. He stood on top of a small ladder. The tree we'd picked out that morning was almost ten feet tall. All twelve of us had set out just after breakfast, in search of the perfect tree. It only took an hour of tramping through the snow around our Canadian property to find it.

"Don't you think those are enough?" Jet looked at the array of lights that wrapped around the tree. There were so many, they practically blinded me.

"I saw a tree in a movie once. It was almost completely covered in lights." Luke scratched his head. "Isn't that how they're supposed to be?"

"It can be however you want it." Jacinda kneeled beside him, plucking glass ornaments from where they were carefully wrapped in tissue paper. They were all new. She'd bought them at Tiffany's when she'd been on a trip to New York the week prior. During the past three months, Jacinda had visited the Big Apple on a monthly basis.

"There are no rules on how to do this?" Luke untwisted another string of lights.

"Nope." Jacinda held up an ornament. "You can make the tree however you want it."

"I fink we should string some popcorn together." Edgar sat cross legged on the floor. "That's what people do sometimes, in'it?"

Jet snickered. "If you're five years old maybe."

Amber glared at Jet. "I think that's a great idea. Let's go pop some."

Amber and Edgar trailed off to the kitchen.

It was amazingly peaceful being back at our home in the Canadian Rockies. It wasn't where we normally lived, but we all agreed it was where we wanted to spend our first true Christmas together as a family of twelve.

The sounds and scents of popping corn soon filled the room. Susannah moved from the couch to kneel beside Jacinda. “That one’s pretty.” She pointed to the ornament in the shape of a snowflake.

“Do you want to hang it?” Jacinda smoothed a strand of long, blond hair behind her ear and smiled.

Susannah took it and stood. When she walked to the tree, it was hard not to notice her attire. Susannah wore skinny jeans and a red sweater made of some expensive, shimmering fabric that had holes cut strategically out of the shoulders. Bracelets jangled from her wrists. Glittery earrings adorned her ears. Susannah looked like a model straight out of a fashion magazine. The ankle high stiletto boots only added to the look.

I admired her long, black hair which hung in heavy waves to her waist. She held up the ornament. Her ivory skin practically sparkled with happiness. The days where Susannah didn’t eat, talk, or shower were long over. So were the days where she only wore baggy T-shirts and sweatpants. Now, Jacinda styled her on a regular basis.

My sister’s dream had finally come true. Since Susannah lived with Jacinda and Luke, Jacinda had found someone to style on a daily basis who just happened to be the perfect client. Susannah never batted an eye over some of the ridiculous things Jacinda picked out for her, like the sweater she currently wore. She had to be freezing with all of the holes in it.

“Where should I put it?” Susannah ran her fingers along its edge.

“Wherever you want.” Di sat at the kitchen table, sipping hot chocolate while trying to beat Raven in a game of chess. It seemed she’d met her match. Their games could last for hours, and on occasion, days. “Like Jacinda said, there are no rules.”

Di finally moved her piece which got a concentrated frown out of Raven.

“Hmm.” His orange eyes glowed with intensity.

Di smiled. “Your move, brother.”

I gave the last string of lights to Luke before joining Flint on the couch. He put his arm around me and offered me a sip of his eggnog. I took the mug and looked over my shoulder when the front door opened. A rush of cold air followed.

“We’ve got the presents!” Mica exclaimed excitedly.

She, Jasper and Father all ambled in. In thick winter jackets and rosy cheeks, they were the epitome of winter. Each carried enormous bags of

shiny wrapped presents in gold, red and green. We'd all done our shopping back in Colorado before we'd flown up to Canada. However, there'd been so many presents, we'd left them on the plane and agreed to deal with them today.

"Is that all of them?" Jacinda frowned.

"Nope. There are more bags in the truck." Mica kicked off her boots and jacket before lifting her nose. "Is that popcorn I smell?" She disappeared into the kitchen.

"Did Greg finally fly home?" I asked. Since Greg, our pilot, lived in Florida, he'd probably wanted to get going. It was a long flight. I couldn't think of anything worse than Christmas where it was seventy degrees, but Greg shuddered every time I suggested he stay with us for the holiday. It seemed he preferred his holidays on the beach, especially when those beaches included women in bikinis. I'd also come to learn he was a notorious bachelor.

"He flew back after we collected everything." Jasper set down the bags he was carrying before going back outside for the rest.

I eyed the present on top of the bag nearest the kitchen. It was the gift I'd bought Flint—a watch with a personalized inscription. I fingered the charm bracelet on my wrist. *Love You Forever.* He'd now have something to wear that also held the inscription that meant so much to us.

I leaned back against Flint's shoulder. We had four whole weeks before Greg would return to pick us up. I couldn't think of anywhere I'd rather be for the holidays.

"Happy?" Flint leaned down.

I nodded.

Flint's lips brushed my neck. "In a couple of years, when we have jobs, it may be harder to have Christmas trips like this. Father may have to experience his first Christmas without us."

My heart warmed every time I heard Flint call Conroy Father. He'd been doing it for months, but it still made my heart sing. I tugged at my black and gold University of Colorado sweatshirt. Pride filled me. I was a student now and planned to become a social worker. "We'll find a way to be together."

All of us had settled in Colorado and attended college. Flint, Di, Mica, the twins and I lived in Boulder. Flint and I had our own place while the twins and Mica had theirs. Father, Jacinda, Luke, Edgar, Amber and

Susannah lived in Denver—Father, Amber and Edgar in one home, while Luke, Jacinda and Susannah lived in another.

Since we only lived an hour from one another, we often met up on weekends, but not always. I had other friends now too, not just my family. I pulled out my phone. A text from Grace lit it up. I smothered a laugh at the picture she sent.

It was just like we'd always imagined. We now lived normal, mundane, peaceful lives. We got up for school Monday through Friday. On the weekends, we'd often meet up to study, see concerts together, try new restaurants or just hang out and watch movies. It was so blissfully ordinary I thought sometimes I'd burst from happiness.

Flint leaned down and kissed me softly. "I can't think of anywhere I'd rather be."

"Me either."

He hugged me closer. I glanced over my shoulder.

Father stood against the wall with a wistful, content smile. He caught me watching him. Neither of us had to say anything. Father's look said it all. Finally, our family was exactly how he'd always dreamed it would be.

Safe. Free. Together.

I turned back around and leaned against Flint's shoulder. "Merry Christmas," I whispered.

He squeezed me tighter. "Merry Christmas."

RETRIBUTION

The Lost Children World
Book One

THE LOST CHILDREN SERIES—BOOK 4

Retribution kicks off a spin-off series that takes place several years after *The Lost Children Trilogy*.

CHAPTER ONE

Warm, dry air swirled around the classroom, hinting at summer. I tapped my finger against my desk. My professor's voice droned around me, like a buzzing fly I couldn't swat away.

"Lena! Shh!" My best friend, Grace, sat beside me. Her blue eyes flashed daggers my way.

I smiled wanly and stopped my incessant fidgeting. "Sorry."

Grace straightened and turned primly to listen intently as Professor Dillinger continued his lecture.

Everything in me wanted to roll my eyes at my teacher's nasally words.

Professor Dillinger was my least favorite university professor. Just last week, I'd watched as he made *another* pass at one of my classmates. She was a sophomore, like me, but only nineteen—unlike my ripe old age of twenty-three.

When our professor, who had to be at least forty years old, called her to his desk, most of my classmates had already left. I was still fighting to get my supplies in my backpack as everything threatened to fall out again.

From the back of the classroom, I'd watched as he'd approached her.

I knew Professor Dillinger had no idea I was still there, judging by his brazen moves.

My classmate had been visibly nervous. She'd run her hands through her long blond hair while shifting her weight from foot to foot. Professor Dillinger had stepped close enough to brush against her while telling her she'd need to improve her grades if she wanted to pass his class. He'd then invited her to his office for one-on-one coaching.

I'd snorted. Unfortunately, neither of them had heard me.

I'd seen him pull this stunt on two other women during the semester. The one who *hadn't* gone for one-on-one coaching had cried to her friends after he gave her a D on our last term paper. However, the one who had gone received an A, but I couldn't help noticing that her eyes were now

downcast whenever he looked her way. She also sat in the back of the class. Before, she'd sat in the front.

"What a creep," I muttered under my breath.

Grace gave me a sharp look.

This time, I *did* roll my eyes.

By the time the lecture finished, Grace was fuming.

"Really, Lena!" She collected her binder and placed it neatly in her bag, on top of her textbooks. The rest of our classmates were standing around us, packing their things. The rustle of papers and buzz of conversation increased.

"You could at least pretend to pay attention!" Grace carefully zippered her backpack closed and flipped her blond hair out of the way before slinging the pack over her shoulder.

Since she was a few inches taller than me, I had to look up to see her. I muttered a sound of disgust. "It's hard for me to do that when the guy's the biggest douchebag in the world."

Crossing her arms, Grace frowned. "But you don't have any proof that he's done the things you claim. It could all be a misunderstanding."

"A misunderstanding?" I ran an agitated hand through my long red curls. "Really, Grace. How can you say that? I told you what I've seen, and he has a—"

I cut myself off just in time.

It wasn't the first time I'd almost alluded to Grace about my extrasensory ability. Luckily, I'd stopped myself each time, but still, it was hard. Grace was my best friend. I was very comfortable with her and told her everything.

Well . . . almost everything.

She had no idea about *that* side of me. Nobody outside of my family did. Father was so terrified of our secrets being exposed that he'd raised us to never tell a soul. Still . . . keeping that part of my life a secret was proving to be harder than I'd expected.

I folded my notes in half and stuffed them into the front of my backpack. Looking around for my pen, I frowned when I couldn't find it.

Grace bent over and picked my pen up off the floor. "Here. You dropped it ten minutes ago."

"Oh, thanks." I stuffed it into the pocket with my notes.

“You better zipper that.” She pointed at my bag. “Those notes are already falling out.”

“Oh. Crap.” Sliding my pack off, I grumbled at my escaping papers. With careful attention, I zipped it closed. “There. Done.” I grinned.

Grace smiled approvingly.

“We better go.” Grace nodded toward the line between the lecture-hall seats. Our classmates were slowly filtering to the back of the room and out the door. A hum of conversation swirled around us as people chatted with their friends.

As Grace and I made our way out of the lecture hall, I turned to see if the professor had cornered anyone. A relieved sigh escaped me that he hadn’t.

Professor Dillinger stood alone near the whiteboard. He’d pulled out a few things from his bag and had sat them on his desk. His cell phone and a pack of Marlborough Lights were visible.

I switched my vision, activating the part of my brain that was dormant in others, just as Professor Dillinger picked up his phone.

My teacher’s cloud appeared. The dark-gray aura swirled around his shoulders, dipping and flowing as if caught in a breeze.

With a flick of my mind, I pulled his cloud off his body and molded it into a tiny energy ball. The cloud crackled. It was an infinitesimal amount of energy, since it was a single cloud, but it would do.

I carefully manipulated my energy ball toward Professor Dillinger’s pants and with precise movements lowered the zipper on his fly.

The professor continued swiping something on his smart phone. The phone was only inches from his face. He was none the wiser that his tighty-whities were visible for the world to see.

With a satisfied smile, I dispersed the energy and turned my attention back to the line before I followed Grace out the door.

Outside, the springtime Colorado sun shone down on us. Scents of freshly cut grass hung in the air. In the distance, a lawn mower hummed. The campus’s grounds crew was everywhere as they planted flowerbeds and rode lawnmowers.

Around us, other university students ambled by or power walked to their next lecture. The buzz of so many people made me smile.

Grace hitched her pack up higher on her shoulder and checked her phone. “Since we have fifteen minutes till our next class, do you want to

grab a smoothie? I'm starving."

I perked up at the mention of food. "Sure!"

Heading toward Broadway, I pulled out my phone to check my messages. A smile lifted my lips when I saw one from Flint.

When are you going to be home, babe?

I quickly typed in a reply. ***One more class, so maybe an hour?***

Good. I want you.

A flush crept up my neck. A tingle in my belly came next. Just the thought of Flint's large hands running over my body did that. Every time. My body hummed in anticipation.

Looking forward to it.

"Is that your dreamy lover boy texting you?" Grace smiled and gave me a side-eye.

I laughed and put my phone away. "Maybe."

She pulled open the door to the smoothie shop. "Let me guess. He's wondering when you'll be home?"

I bit my cheek to stop my smile. "Something like that."

We stepped inside. A blast of air from the HVAC system ruffled the wild curls around my face. I pulled out my wallet and stepped up to the counter so we could order.

When it came to paying, I beat Grace to the register.

She grumbled beside me and tucked her wallet back into her purse. Her blond hair fell in front of her face, hiding what I knew were pink cheeks. "You don't have to always pay for me, Lena."

"I know. I know." When the smoothie shop employee handed me back my credit card, I shoved it into my purse without bothering to find my wallet. "But you know how it is. My trust fund can handle it. Besides, I have a better paying part-time job than you."

Grace took our smoothies from the employee's outstretched hands. I grabbed my strawberry mango and sighed in contentment after the first sip.

"But I'll never be able to pay you back." She plopped down at an open table and pushed aside the newspaper that lay on it.

“You don’t have to.” Dropping my bag at my feet, I took another sip of the cool smoothie.

Sighing, she elbowed me gently. “Thanks, bestie.”

I elbowed her back. “No probs, bestie.”

She giggled.

It wasn’t the first time Grace had been embarrassed about me paying for her things. I was sure it wouldn’t be the last. But even though she was up to her ears in student loans, she still insisted she could pay her way. I was the one who wouldn’t let her.

Since Father had awarded me and the other lost children in my family—Flint, Jacinda, Di, Mica, Jet, Jasper, Amber, Susannah, Luke, Edgar, and Raven—with our own trust funds last year, none of us would ever be in need of money. Paying for a smoothie or a concert ticket or a meal out every now and then was the least I could do for my best friend, who struggled to pay her rent each month.

“Hey, did you see this?” Grace flipped open our local newspaper to another article about an attack on campus. “Someone got assaulted again.”

My insides stilled as I skimmed the article. Another woman had come forward after being attacked while walking to her dorm late at night. My cheeks heated with anger.

“That’s the fifth attack this semester.”

Grace gulped a mouthful of her smoothie, her eyebrows knitting together. “It’s scary. It’s almost like . . . I dunno . . . there’s a serial attacker or something around here.”

I took a deep breath and switched my vision. Doing so was an automatic habit. Anytime I felt scared or worried about who might be around me, my vision switched of its own accord.

But all that billowed around us were white and cream-colored clouds. Even people passing on the street had normal-looking clouds, except for the odd few that were grayish.

None were black. That was the telltale sign of an evil person. A serial attacker’s cloud would no doubt be pitch-black.

I shuddered.

“Oh my gosh!” Gracie exclaimed. “We’re going to be late!” She jumped from her seat after checking the time on her phone. Her half-drunk smoothie tipped precariously from her hand.

I’d completely forgotten that we were supposed to hurry to our next lecture. I grabbed my bag and jogged out the door behind her.

But as we raced to our next class with our smoothies gripped tightly in our hands, my mind kept returning to the article in the paper. Each day it seemed more and more likely that a serial attacker lived on campus.

And anyone could be his next target.

CHAPTER TWO

The apartment Flint and I lived in was a mile off campus. I generally walked every day to and from class. Even in the winter.

After growing up in the Forbidden Hills, I didn't think a walk in the winter was anything out of the ordinary. As kids, my adopted siblings and I would play for hours outside in the freezing cold. That was one of the few forms of entertainment we'd had.

But today was warm even though it was technically still spring. The sun beat down. Sweat beaded on my forehead as my T-shirt stuck to my lower back, where my backpack pressed against it.

In a way, it reminded me of my homeless days from two years before. For several months, after waking in an alleyway with no memories of who I was or what had happened to me, I'd walked everywhere then too, with only my backpack for company. That same pack was hanging from my shoulders.

I smiled as I hopped off the sidewalk to cross the street. A breeze flowed across my skin as I giggled, remembering Jacinda's horror when I'd refused to buy a new bag for school. One of the zippers on my pack was broken, and I'd had to patch a hole in the bottom of the bag, but it still worked.

And that backpack had been with me through so much. It held more than just my textbooks. It held memories of who I really was.

Two blocks later, I was climbing the steps to our apartment building. Even in town, the Rockies loomed all around us, like gigantic pyramids scattered on a precipice. Their familiar snow-capped peaks betokened cool winds and frosty mornings. At the moment, I felt so hot that I would have lain down in a big pile of snow and buried my face in it.

"You're home." Flint's deep voice greeted me when I stepped into our apartment. He sat on the couch, reading the newspaper. His chestnut hair was tousled as if he hadn't bothered to brush it.

I smiled and let my backpack fall to the floor. In the next second, the air rustled around me.

Flint stood directly in my path.

Since I was used to his inhuman speed, all I did was fling my arms around him and plop a big kiss on his lips.

“Mmm . . . sweaty.” He chuckled more as I pulled back.

Another giggle worked its way up my throat. “I thought hot and sweaty was your favorite way to have me.”

His eyes darkened. “It is.”

I squealed when he scooped me up with another lightning-fast move. The next thing I knew, he was tossing me onto our king-sized bed before peeling his shirt off in a blurred move.

The sight of Flint’s hard, chiseled chest always got my pulse racing. It did so even more today. Perhaps the lingering frustration over my professor’s unethical behaviors, or my fear over the thought of a serial attacker, or the sight of Flint’s breathtaking physique made me feel the emotions coursing through my chest. Whatever it was, pent-up energy was built up inside me, wanting to be unleashed.

And extracurricular time with my boyfriend in our bedroom seemed like the perfect way to get it out.

~ ~ ~

Thirty minutes later, we lay in a tangle of sheets.

“I’m not the only sweaty one now.” I ran a finger down his chest, making his muscles jump in response.

He gripped my finger gently before turning on his side. Propping his elbow on the bed, he cupped his head and gazed down at me. His dark eyes flecked with gold studied me intently. His firm lips, straight nose, and smooth skin made him so achingly beautiful that my breath stopped.

I expected a smile to tug up his lips. Instead, he frowned.

“Have you seen the newspaper today?” His eyebrows knit together.

“Yeah, I have.”

Letting go of my finger, he pulled me closer to him. “Then you know there was another assault on campus.”

Anger again coiled in my belly, like a snake that wanted to strike. “Yeah. I saw it. That’s the fifth one this semester.”

“Exactly. Maybe I should start picking you up from class. I could skip a few classes to meet you on the days I end after you.”

“You know I can walk myself home just fine.”

He frowned. “I think it would be safer if I joined you.”

I arched an eyebrow and switched my vision. Flint’s pulsing blue, green, and orange cloud came into view. It was larger than normal, having grown from his worry. Pulling his cloud from his shoulders, I disengaged my own cloud and joined it with his.

Only a few seconds had passed from when I’d switched my vision. Flint was still looking at me expectantly for an answer.

Using the cloud, I flicked it behind him and, with a slight shove, smacked his ass.

He jumped.

I buried my head in the pillow so he wouldn’t see my grin.

“Lena . . .” he growled. “Are you trying to make a point?”

I lifted my head to see his annoyed expression.

“Perhaps.” I let the clouds dissipate. They automatically returned to our shoulders. “I know you worry about me, Flint. I get that. Asking you to *not* worry would be like asking you to stop breathing, so I won’t. But you do know that I can take care of myself. I think I’ve proved that time and time again, so while I’m worried about this guy too, it’s not *me* I’m worried about. It’s all of the other women on campus that he could catch unawares.”

His scowl didn’t lessen.

I cupped his cheek. “You’d be better off escorting Mica to and from class every day, although I doubt she’d let you.”

Flint grimaced. “She’d probably slug me in the shoulder and tell me to stop following her.”

I laughed.

The twins and Mica also attended the University of Colorado in Boulder. The three of them, Flint, and I were all sophomores, but we were soon to be juniors. The semester would end soon, which meant all of us were officially halfway through college.

“Should we get up and make something to eat?” I asked.

The smoothie I’d had with Grace seemed years ago. And I knew the longer I let Flint dwell on this topic, the more likely he was to start showing up at my classes when they finished. As much as I loved him, I didn’t want him shadowing me everywhere I went.

Flint ran his hand along my hip. His brow furrowed.

I bounded from the bed just as he opened his mouth. “Want to order a pizza?” I asked.

I grabbed one of Flint’s shirts and dashed from the room. In the living room, the newspaper Flint had been reading still lay open to the local news. The same article I’d read earlier flashed across my vision.

I bit my lip. From what the article said, all five women described the man similarly: stocky build, dark hair, and vicious. He’d left all of his victims with more than just bruises and traumatic memories. A few had broken bones and deep cuts.

Tension welled up inside me again. I just hoped the police caught him soon.

~ ~ ~

I met Grace the next day at our usual spot before class. Since we were both studying sociology, we had most of our classes together.

Her long legs dangled from the concrete planter box she’d hopped onto. Bright pansies bloomed behind her. She ate an apple while reading a textbook. I swear she didn’t even know when I approached her. She was that engrossed in it.

I cleared my throat.

Her loud, crunching chewing stopped. When she peeked over the top of the book, her eyes widened. “Oh! I didn’t see you there.”

She hopped off the planter and slipped her backpack over a shoulder. After one last bite of her apple, she tossed the core into a trash can near the curb.

“You’re on time.” From the smile that beamed across her face, she seemed pleased.

“I’m not *always* late. I believe I was on time three of five days last week.”

Tucking her book into her pack, she raised an eyebrow. “I’d almost think you’re becoming responsible.”

I laughed. “Perhaps I am.”

She giggled and looped her arm through mine. Together, we strolled down the sidewalk to our next class and rounded the corner to enter our building. Another beautiful day in Boulder loomed: clear skies, bright sun,

and the hint of summer in the air. A smile spread across my face as I switched my vision.

Aura clouds appeared around the other students bustling along the sidewalks. Most were white or ivory. A few were light gray. Grace's was bright white—not surprising. That cotton-ball cloud swirling around her shoulders was what had drawn me to her in our freshman year.

The warm and content feeling was still flowing through me when another cloud entered my peripheral vision. Even though it was far away, it stood out among the sea of white, ivory, and dull gray.

Its color made me stop cold.

Black.

Not only pitch-black, but *pulsing* black. And the cloud around the occupant's shoulders was growing in size.

That only meant one thing.

I spun in a circle, getting a few disgruntled comments from students who bumped into me from behind. Grace also muttered an expletive since we'd stopped mid-stride in the middle of the sidewalk.

Straightening, I pulled my arm from Grace's. I shaded my eyes and frantically searched the crowd of students.

There!

The black cloud belonged to a person hurrying away. He appeared to be a man, from his stocky build and broad shoulders. He also had dark hair. I couldn't see anything else about him. Jeans covered his lower half, and a hooded sweatshirt adorned his top—warm clothes for warm weather. *Odd.*

"Lena? What the heck are you doing?"

Grace stood at my side, her long blond hair flowing in the breeze. Her hands were on her hips, a frown on her face. The rest of the students entering the building behind us didn't give me a second glance.

"I . . ." I continued watching the man. With every second that passed, he was escaping, and if his cloud was pulsing, that meant one horrible thing.

He was going to hurt somebody.

I can't let that happen!

"I have to go, Grace. Fill me in on what I miss!" I took off.

Keeping my vision switched, I sprinted down the sidewalk. Some other students cast me a few peculiar glances. Most didn't seem to care. They probably thought I was late for a class and running to it.

If only that were the case.

My legs pumped rhythmically as the man rounded a corner, disappearing between two buildings. I couldn't be sure, but he seemed to be following a woman. She seemed oblivious.

No!

My lungs burned as I caught up to the area where he'd disappeared. Another sidewalk separated these buildings. The tall brick walls rose on either side. Strips of grass lined their perimeters, and birds chirped in the trees above.

For all intents and purposes, the day looked like another normal one on campus as the school year drew to a close.

Where did he go?

I ran down the sidewalk, glancing every which way. When I reached the backs of the buildings, I spun in a circle. More students were mingling about. Some sat on the grass. Others were still walking to class, but the numbers were dwindling. Lectures had started.

"Dammit!" I muttered angrily. I'd lost him.

Hefting my bag up higher on my shoulders, I slung my hands through the straps and debated my options. It was possible he'd followed the girl into one of these buildings. In which case, I could stay out here on the grass, waiting for one of them to emerge.

But that will only work if they exit from one of these doors. If they take a back door out, I wouldn't know.

Biting my lip, I considered the other option. It was possible he hadn't followed that woman at all, and it had simply appeared that way, in which case, either he'd entered one of these buildings to attend a class, or he'd begun running when he rounded the corner and by now was long gone.

However, there was one thing I felt certain of. His cloud had been pitch-black and pulsing. That meant either he was intending to hurt someone soon, or thoughts of hurting someone had been foremost in his mind, manipulating the aura around him.

Either way, my brow furrowed in worry.

On shaky legs, I walked back to class so I could join Grace. I debated calling the police, but what could I say? *Hey, I saw a black-clouded man, and since his cloud was pulsing, he's planning to hurt someone soon.*

Yeah. That would go over well.

It didn’t help that I also had to come up with some fabrication to explain my erratic behavior to Grace. It wouldn’t be the first time.

My backpack banged against my lower back as I worried my lower lip.

A memory of the newspaper article I’d read yesterday turned over in my thoughts. A man who repeatedly attacked women was on campus. Everyone knew that. And the man I’d just seen fit his description.

Now, I had to figure out if this black-clouded man was *him*.

CHAPTER THREE

"You're certain the person you saw had a malevolent cloud and was intent on doing harm?" Di's words rolled across the living room in her Denver home. As usual, she wore black from head to toe.

The rest of our non-traditional family, minus Susannah, sat on the couches or floor around her. Father leaned back in his chair, his arms crossed. Outside, gray clouds covered the vast sky. Rain was forecast.

I almost rolled my eyes but stopped myself. Di was just being her thorough self. I shouldn't have been offended that she was questioning me again.

Well, not too offended.

"Yes, Di. I'm sure. His cloud was pitch-black and growing. You know as well as I do what that means."

Flint shifted beside me. His warm side pressed into me, and his unique scent of spicy wood and tangerines wafted toward me. A permanent frown was etched on his features. He'd been looking that way all week, ever since I'd chased the mystery man on campus and come home to tell him about it. And despite my insistence that I didn't need him to escort me home from class every day, he'd started doing just that.

I inched away from him. We'd had another argument about his over-protectiveness this morning, and again, we came to no firm resolution.

Sighing, I turned my attention back to my family. Since the weekend had arrived, our entire family had met up in Denver—something we often did on our days off. I was thankful that everyone was here. All week I'd been waiting to get their opinions on what I should do regarding the black-clouded man.

"So now what?" Jacinda's brow puckered. "Do we tell the police or see if we can find him again?"

My half-sister's back was ramrod straight as she stood near Luke. Long flaxen-colored hair cascaded down her back in thick waves. Since she wore three-inch heels, she almost came to the bridge of Luke's nose. The

rest of her frame looked as it always did. Stylish. Chic. And very supermodel-like.

Only one thing was different about her.

A small bump was prominent through her loose, flowing top. She was five months pregnant.

The werewolf, or “genetically enhanced lupine male,” to be exact, watched my sister with his piercing golden eyes. A low growl emitted from Luke’s throat when Jacinda twisted her hands in worry. Since they’d been a couple for over a year, Luke had grown incredibly protective of my sister, especially since she now carried his child.

“I say we find the bastard,” Luke muttered. His eyes flickered again in a way that made him look inhuman.

“And then what?” Mica chipped in from where she sat on the couch. Her square teeth flashed in a sarcastic smile. “Stroll up to him and ask him why the heck he’s walking around with a black cloud around his shoulders? Oh, and politely ask him if he’s also going around campus attacking women?” She snorted. “Yeah, that will go over *really* well.”

A bag of chips sat at Mica’s side. She popped one into her mouth. Loud crunches followed.

Jasper chuckled from where he sat by her side, while his twin, Jet, also bit back a laugh. The twins looked identical: stocky builds, curly jet-black hair, and clear blue eyes.

The twins and Mica lived together in Boulder, not far from the apartment Flint and I shared. Like us, they were also university students and had heard the rumors circulating throughout campus of the serial attacker, a rumor that seemed true, given that another assault had occurred last week.

However, the rest of our family resided in Denver. Father lived in his sprawling mansion with Edgar and Amber, whereas Luke, Susannah, and Jacinda lived in a chic condo in the heart of the city. Raven and Di lived in the quiet suburban house we were currently meeting in.

I eyed Di, Raven, and Flint. The full-blooded siblings had a natural affinity to each other. All three of them had olive skin, tall frames, dark eyes, and critical minds. I felt fairly certain that if Flint and I weren’t together, he would have opted to live with Di and Raven in Denver. He could easily have pursued his engineering degree at the university Di attended. But since Flint and I had been together since we were teenagers, I didn’t see that ever happening.

Amber nibbled at a fingernail, her large brown eyes wide under her pixie haircut. She stood near Edgar, the two of them behind Father. Raven and Di's living room was modest in size and furniture. When we all met here, some of us inevitably stood or sat on the floor.

"What if Lena tries to find him again?" Amber stopped biting her fingernail and stood up straighter. "And then we start following him to see what he's up to?"

Father frowned. "I know all of you have attributes other people don't, which could give you the ability to find this man, but this isn't related to Project Renatus or O'Brien. I'm not sure it's wise to become involved in something like this. It's imperative you all hide your gifts from the public."

I sighed. Father was always worried about us, especially when it came to others finding out about our powers. Who knew what would happen to us if our gifts became general knowledge. Possibly, Father would be locked up since he'd essentially kidnapped us when we were babies. Or maybe we'd be studied against our will.

We didn't know.

But since those unknowns held so many implications, we'd spent our entire existence hiding. When we were little, Father had hidden us deep in the Forbidden Hills, but that was to keep us safe from his former colleagues at O'Brien Pharmaceuticals. Father, Albert Darlington, and Raven's former adoptive father, Marcus Christenson, had given all of us our unique powers.

What they'd done was illegal and nefarious, but that was in the past. It couldn't be changed. Regardless, I wasn't sure I would have had it any other way, even if we could go back in time. The people in this room were my family. If Father hadn't brought us up together, who knew what condition we would be in now, if we would have survived our nightmare childhoods at all.

I eyed Flint. My heart beat faster despite our recurrent arguments. *If not for Father, I'd have never met Flint.*

But . . . up until now, our past had seemed to be just that—our past. We'd never discussed using our extrasensory powers in a coordinated manner again. The last time we'd done that, we'd stormed Marcus's estate, killed him and his guards, freed Raven, and essentially guaranteed a peaceful existence for ourselves.

But that eventful day had been over eighteen months ago. Whenever I thought about that time, it seemed like a distant dream—almost surreal.

And for the first time in my life, I was living like everyone else. My family and I all blended into the public even though none of us were normal humans.

I certainly didn't want to jeopardize our safety and new way of life, but at the same time, I couldn't let a man who regularly assaulted women walk free if we had the power to stop him.

I bit my lip. *If he is that man, we still don't have proof he's anything other than an evil guy.*

That thought had been plaguing me all week. Possibly, I was blowing all of this out of proportion. "But his cloud was pulsing. He was up to something," I muttered the words to myself, getting a raised eyebrow out of Flint.

"We can't turn a blind eye," I said more loudly, addressing everyone. "I know you worry about us, Father, but I can't pretend I didn't see what I did. If he hurts somebody again, and we had the chance to stop him, how could we live with that?"

Father leaned back in his chair, his brow furrowing. His sharp hazel eyes, deep wrinkles, and gray wispy hair were all so comfortingly familiar. However, since Father had taken the first-generation drugs that had given us our powers, he had slightly enhanced abilities too, as well as permanent injuries.

My words still hung in the air. Everyone shifted in their seats, eyeing each other.

The sound of the front door opening drifted in from the entryway.

"Is that Susannah?" Edgar cocked his head.

I smiled. Each day, Edgar's strange Cockney accent grew less and less. Since Edgar was safe and free, his behavior had become more normal, his peculiar accent disappearing more each year.

"Hi. Sorry I'm late." Susannah slipped into the living room and set her bag down. Waist-length black hair hung down her back. That, along with bright-blue eyes, porcelain skin, and a slim build made her an incredibly beautiful young woman. She also looked extremely fragile, like a twig that could be snapped.

But looks could be deceiving.

With a deft flick of her mind, talon-like claws could emerge from Susannah's fingertips. With one swipe of her hand, Susannah could easily

slice open someone's jugular. In her eagle form, she'd single-handedly killed Marcus.

Luckily, she'd never done anything like that again. After killing Marcus, she'd become calmer and more grounded. Each day she grew less skittish and surer. And similar to Luke and Edgar, she seemed more "normal" every day.

"What did I miss?" she asked, slipping off her flip-flops. Bright-pink nail polish shone on her toes. No doubt, Jacinda had taken her for pedicures again.

Jet leaned back and stretched his arms on the couch back. "We're currently deciding if we should track some potential psychotic, serial-attacker, black-clouded guy Lena saw on our campus the other day. Either that or leave it be. But you know, since we're apparently superheroes now, it may be our destiny to track him." He snickered.

Mica and Jasper laughed.

Susannah sat on the floor, her slim legs crisscrossing beneath her. "Is this about the assaults taking place on Boulder's campus?"

"That's the one," Jet replied.

Susannah wrapped her hands loosely around her ankles. "Do you want me to fly over there and keep an eye on things? I'm off for a few days."

Susannah had a job at the local movie theater. She'd worked out a deal with the manager so that she only did the cleaning. It was a good job to ease her into the workforce since it wasn't socially overwhelming. Most of her days were spent sweeping up spilled popcorn and wiping drops of sticky soda off the seats.

"You're too big in your eagle form," Flint replied. "Someone may spot you."

Susannah shrugged. "If I stay high enough, it would be hard to judge my size from the ground."

"But how could you find him if we don't know what he looks like?" Di asked after crossing her arms. Her shrewd dark eyes narrowed in Susannah's direction.

Susannah cocked her head, the speed unnaturally fast. "I could at least keep an eye on things. I could spot any attacks from above."

"That's only if he attacks in the open." Mica popped another chip into her mouth. "If he drags her somewhere or lures her into his house, we'd never know."

“Haven’t most of the attacks happened in the woman’s dorm room or apartment?” Jasper raised an eyebrow. “All of the news stories have said he broke in before attacking them.”

My eyebrows knit together as I remembered my initial impression, that the dark-clouded man was following a woman. *Maybe that’s what he does. Follows them initially, learns their routines, and then attacks. It would explain why his cloud was pulsing. He was imagining what’s to come.*

“In which case, his attack is imminent.” My words filled the room as my thoughts solidified. I quickly told everyone what I’d been thinking. “I think he’s planning to attack soon, if the man I spotted was the attacker.”

Di’s pragmatic words followed. “That’s a big assumption. You saw a man with a black cloud walking behind a young woman. That doesn’t mean he’s going to attack her.”

“But his cloud was pulsing and growing, Di. Trust me. He’s planning on doing something bad soon, even if he’s not our attacker. And if this guy *is* the serial-attacker, he’s thinking of attacking again soon, and that woman I thought he might have been following could be his next victim. Even if I’m wrong and I’m blowing this all out of proportion, we still can’t sit back and hope that’s not the case. If we can prevent an assault from happening, we should.”

“So what do we do?” Flint’s energy pulsed toward me. It had steadily grown as I explained my thoughts. “Station you on campus, constantly searching for this guy until we find him? And then what? Follow him? Wait for him to attack and hope to catch him before he actually does?”

His large palm settled on my thigh. From his low tone, he seemed to be feeling similar to Luke. “I won’t let you put yourself in danger, Lena. If this guy catches wind that you’re after him, who’s to say *you* won’t be his next victim?”

I covered Flint’s hand with my own. “I’m the strongest one here. You all know that. If anyone’s going to initially track him down, it should be me.”

“That’s only if he doesn’t get his hands on you,” Flint replied. “I know you’re mentally strong, but physically you’re still weaker than most males. If he knocked you out, your ability wouldn’t protect you.”

“Flint’s right.” Jacinda flashed her worried eyes my way. “I don’t like this at all.”

Jasper nodded. “Flint has a point. We know you’re strong, Lena, but a good blow to the head would render you useless.”

“But if we worked together, that wouldn’t happen.” My voice rose. “Susannah could be our eye in the sky. Mica could see if anyone approaches me. Amber could catch this guy’s scent if we get close enough. With that, we could track him to where he lives. Meanwhile, Di could warn us if she sees anything in our future. Flint and Luke could be on standby to take him down if necessary.” I stopped since I was breathless from talking so fast. After inhaling deeply, I added, “Should I go on?”

Everyone either frowned or looked contemplative.

“You guys, *please.”* I squeezed Flint’s hand, which had warmed considerably on my thigh. “Let’s at least try. And if things become too risky or if it appears our abilities could be revealed, we’ll stop. But let’s at least see if we can find him.”

The room was so quiet, I could hear the clock ticking in the hallway.

“Is anyone with me?” I stared at the sea of faces.

My entire family eyed each other. Slowly, everyone raised a hand one by one.

Di finally exhaled audibly and nodded. “Okay, we’re with you, but that doesn’t mean I like it.”

I grinned.

CHAPTER FOUR

We drove back to Boulder after our family meeting. Since everyone was off today and tomorrow from their part-time jobs, we were all free for the rest of the weekend.

We all agreed to have Father and Jacinda stay behind. Despite having slightly enhanced senses, Father didn't have the capabilities we all had. He was also older and extremely busy with a new pharmaceutical company he'd started. And since Jacinda was pregnant, well, that was a no-brainer.

None of us were willing to risk her safety or the baby's safety in any capacity.

It was agreed Jacinda would stay with Father in his mansion until Luke returned. Even though Jacinda was safe in Denver, Luke still didn't want Jacinda staying alone at their downtown condo, given all that was happening with her pregnancy.

Jacinda hugged me tightly as we stood in Di and Raven's driveway. Sprinkles of rain coated my skin, as if Mother Nature were kissing me.

"Stay safe, Sister." Her tone was tight.

"I'll be fine. Don't worry about me. You just take care of the little bun or wolf pup—or whatever he or she is—in your oven."

She forced a laugh as anxiety flashed across her face.

My stomach dropped. I had meant that as a silly joke to lighten the mood, but as each day passed, Jacinda was becoming increasingly worried about the baby, even though she tried to hide it.

Since Luke and she weren't one-hundred-percent human, none of us knew what their baby would be. So far, Father and Di were in charge of her obstetric care since hospitals were out of the question.

She cradled her belly. "The last ultrasound Di did was normal, but my blood work continues to be different from most humans." Her hand moved faster over her small bump.

"Even if he or she is born with fur, we'll still love your little one." I pulled her quickening hand from her stomach and squeezed it.

Her honey-brown eyes, filled with worry, met mine. “I know we will. It’s just . . .” She shrugged. “I just want him or her to be healthy and fine.”

“I’m sure your baby will be. Just remember that Di and Father know what they’re doing, and so far all of the ultrasounds have showed a normally developing fetus. You just concentrate on staying healthy so you don’t have any problems with a home birth.”

She nodded tightly and nibbled her full bottom lip. “Thank goodness for Luke. He’s convinced everything will work out and helps keep me calm.”

“I’m sorry you’re feeling so stressed about this.” I pulled her into another hug, and her long hair brushed against my face, tickling my nose. “Now, you better get inside Father’s car before this rain ruins your hair.”

Her eyes flashed wide as she reached up to touch her long locks. She’d had a blowout yesterday, as she did every Friday. I was pretty sure Friday was her favorite day of the week.

When she saw my smile, she pinched me lightly on the arm. “Trouble-maker.”

I laughed as Jacinda’s full lips lifted in the first true smile I’d seen on her all day.

“Lena, yo!” Jet called from his new Mustang. He stood at the open driver’s door. Outlines of Mica and Jasper indicated they were already inside the car. “Let’s get a move on before this storm lets loose!”

I squeezed Jacinda’s hand again. “I’ll talk to you soon.”

“Call me later tonight.”

After everyone called goodbye to my sister and Father, we all climbed into our vehicles. My thoughts turned again to the baby. The last round of blood work had detected abnormalities in Jacinda’s blood. Father and Di couldn’t explain it. Before becoming pregnant, Jacinda’s bloodwork—similar to all of ours—had showed abnormalities. That was thanks to our enhanced abilities, which resulted from altered DNA. Yet now, those changes were even greater. We all knew the increase came from the fetus. Unlike with most humans, Jacinda’s blood apparently mixed with her baby’s.

Pushing that disturbing fact aside, I clicked my seat belt into place.

Rain splattered the windshield as Flint reversed. Jacinda and Father waved goodbye from Father’s sleek Maserati just as the clouds opened up and the rain began falling in earnest.

Jet, Jasper, and Mica followed us in Jet's vehicle. Behind them were Di, Raven, Susannah, Amber, Luke, and Edgar. Getting back to Boulder would take about an hour, plenty of time to return to campus this afternoon.

"I still don't like this," Flint muttered as a crack of lightning illuminated the sky.

I pushed a long lock of wavy dark-red hair behind my ear. "I know you don't, but I'll be safe. You know that."

Flint's gaze flashed my way. The tightening of his mouth was his only reply.

I switched my vision. Flint's orange, blue, and green aura pulsed in an opaque cloud around him. It practically filled the vehicle, it was so big.

My heart went out to him while annoyance simultaneously flared within me. Despite eighteen months having passed in which we'd lived safely in the real world, Flint's overprotectiveness hadn't lessened. A year and a half ago, I'd almost ended up as another lab rat for Marcus Christenson. That close call had stayed with Flint. Granted, he'd always been protective, but now . . .

I sighed. At times, his protectiveness could be suffocating.

I snapped my sight back to normal as my head spun from the energy rolling off him. Between his growing worry and the fierce storm outside, the atmosphere felt charged enough to crack the earth open.

With a deft click in my mind, I pulled my own cloud from around my shoulders and created a protective sphere that encircled me like bubble wrap. I sank back into my seat as my shoulders relaxed. The pulsing energy that had been pummeling me vanished. However, I knew if I lifted my cloud's protection I'd feel it again.

Flint merged our vehicle onto the interstate as rain washed the roadway. The family members traveling with us back to Boulder would stay at our apartment for the next few days. Raven and Susannah didn't work until midweek, and everyone else had decided to cut classes on Monday and Tuesday.

I wasn't sure how much we could accomplish in that time, but all of us planned to return to campus that afternoon to see if we could find the mystery man again.

~ ~ ~

The rain lessened as Boulder grew closer. A smile grew on my face while I looked at the beautiful Rockies surrounding our college town.

After Flint pulled into our apartment's parking lot, we stepped out of the vehicle. Humid air swirled around, but at least the rain had fully stopped. The others parked next to us, and the sound of slamming car doors resonated through the lot.

"So what's the plan, man?" Jet ran a large hand through his curly dark hair. His tattoo flashed on his inner wrist, the tattoo Father had given him over two years ago. We all still had the planetary-symbol tattoos on our inner wrists.

I'd grown quite fond of mine—the perfect circle divided into four quarters. It was another piece of my history that made me *me*.

Jet's blue eyes twinkled. "Are we heading down to campus now so we can stir up trouble right away?" He winked.

I smothered a laugh while Flint glowered at him.

"A plan would be more appropriate," Di responded tartly. She crossed her arms and assessed the sky. Her black hair, cut in a bob, brushed her chin. "Looks like the rain is done."

Blue sky peeked through the clouds as the sun's rays filtered down.

"Do you really think a plan is necessary?" I cocked my head at Di. "Don't you think we should just check things out right now and let everybody get used to the campus layout?"

"That sounds like a good idea." Mica pulled out a piece of gum. "Let's just go down there and take a stroll through campus so everyone can familiarize themselves with the buildings. And if Lena happens to spot the guy again, great. If not, we'll do a more thorough search tomorrow."

Jasper agreed. "We're not saving the day today, Di. We don't really need a plan. That will happen after we find the guy." He rubbed his palms together. The glee in his expression made it pretty obvious he was up for any adventure.

"I'm going to transform into my eagle form." Susannah slipped her light coat off and tossed it back into Di's car. Her long black hair tumbled down her back as her thin, pale arms dangled at her sides. "I'll be able to watch you all from above. And then if Lena does see the guy, you can give me a signal, and I'll follow him. With any luck, I'll find out where he lives."

Luke chuckled as his eyes gleamed a caramel color. His inner wolf was always just below the surface. “You’ll give our eye in the sky a completely new meaning.”

“Eagle-eye Susannah. I like the ring it has.” Jasper clapped Jet’s back. “Don’t you agree?”

Jet and Mica laughed as Amber rolled her eyes.

Similar to me, Amber had a small build. She and Susannah were the only people in the group I could look at from eye level. When she caught me watching her, she shook her head and mouthed, *Some things never change.*

Amber had moved on from the brief relationship she and Jasper had experienced when our memories had been erased, and she’d also moved on from her short stint with Edgar.

Despite the romantic fling Amber and Edgar had shared when Edgar first joined our group—a fling that hadn’t worked out—neither held a grudge against the other. If anything, they were fast friends.

Di and Flint shared a weighted look.

“Fine,” Di finally replied. “We’ll go down there without a plan.”

“Do you want to change into your eagle form in the apartment?” Edgar asked Susannah. “We could hide you under a blanket and bring you back to the car. Maybe one of us could drive you to the country so you can start flying.”

Susannah twirled a long lock of dark hair around her finger and cocked her head. “Maybe I could borrow someone’s bike instead? I’ll ride to the edge of town and stash my clothes and the bike in the ditch before I transform.”

“Sure, that works.” I was about to retrieve my bicycle from our apartment when Jet handed Susannah his car keys. “How about you practice your driving skills? It’s not too long of a drive, and we’re all here if you go in the ditch or hit a light pole. We can pick you up in another car.” His lips lifted in a teasing smile.

Susannah’s eyes brightened in excitement as she snatched the keys from his hand. “Your new Mustang? Even better!”

Luke chuckled and tousled Susannah’s hair. His large hand practically swallowed her small head. “Our little girl is growing up.”

Edgar and Raven both laughed.

Susannah ducked out from under his hand, but I still caught her amused smile.

Luke crossed his arms, his massive forearms settling against his chest. He was the largest among us by far.

“Just stay safe, okay, Susannah?” Raven stuffed his hands into his jean pockets and gave her a worried look. I figured Raven, Di, and Flint had inherited their worrying natures from their parents. They were the only full-blooded siblings among us.

“He’s right, love.” Edgar nudged her playfully. “Try not to hit anybody.” With a shaved head and chocolate-colored skin, Edgar still looked exactly as he had when we’d first met him, unlike Susannah, who had changed drastically. She was now a healthy, vibrant young woman, no longer the silent, emaciated waif she’d been when we first met. But similar to me, she was new to driving. We were both still learning.

We all waited for Susannah to drive away. She did pretty well backing out, although Jet’s breath hissed when she came within six inches of rubbing another car’s bumper. The horrified look on Jet’s face was priceless. Both Mica and I laughed as he muttered under his breath that this might have been a mistake.

However, Susannah quickly put the car into drive and drove off. She only hit the curb once on her way out of the parking lot.

“Please tell me this was a good idea,” Jet muttered.

Jasper slung an arm around his brother’s shoulders. Since they were identical twins, telling them apart was hard for most people. “Don’t worry, bro. Your insurance won’t rise too much if you have a claim on your vehicle. And better your car than mine.”

Jet slugged him off as Susannah disappeared from view.

I threaded my fingers through Flint’s and tugged him toward campus. “Let’s all get going while the weather’s cooperating. It will give a few of us a chance to work off some steam.”

Jet snickered as Flint’s cloud grew around him. Flint’s scowl hadn’t lessened since we’d emerged from our vehicles.

Once again, I deftly flicked my cloud around me. Because of Flint’s unique ability, his cloud was stronger than most, so it affected me more than other people’s clouds. He and Luke were similar in that aspect since their strength and speed were so immense. Even though the increased energy could be annoying at times, Flint and Luke were definitely handy to have

around when I needed to form large, powerful energy balls at a second's notice.

Shaking my head, I brushed closer to Flint as his unique scent flooded my senses: spice, wood, and tangerines. I'd know his scent anywhere.

Our feet tapped on the sidewalk as the nine of us headed toward campus.

Twenty minutes later, the environmental buildings came into view. I paused as my phone buzzed in my pocket. I pulled it out to see a text from Grace.

Want to meet for dinner tonight and then go to the library to study?

I chewed my lip. At times like this, I hated that Grace didn't know about my family's history or our powers.

Flint flashed me a questioning look. I showed him the text from Grace.

He shrugged. "You can meet her if you want. It's not like you'll miss much with this crew once we're done for the day."

He nodded toward Mica and the twins.

They were currently in a staring match since we had paused on the sidewalk. Jet's eyes were watering, while Mica was grinning. Given that her ability was enhanced eyesight, I didn't know why he tried. Her eyes naturally coated themselves with moisture even if she didn't blink.

"Dammit!" Jet muttered and blinked furiously. "Someday, I'll beat you."

Mica laughed. "Not likely."

Flint cocked an eyebrow. "See what I mean?"

I bit my cheek to keep from laughing and replied to Grace. ***Sure. Do you want to try that new Thai restaurant?***

Isn't that place expensive?

Don't be silly. It's on me.

She replied with an eye-rolling emoji. **I'm going to owe you thousands of dollars by the time we get jobs.**

I replied with several kissy-face emojis.

“Lena?” Di crossed her arms. “Are you ready to have a look around for this guy that you were insistent we try to find?”

I stuffed my phone back in my pocket. “Sorry. Yeah, let’s get going.”

~ ~ ~

We spent the next two hours wandering around campus. Everybody familiarized themselves with the buildings and layout, but I never saw anybody with a black cloud. I kept my vision in its altered state, but the most threatening cloud I saw was a dark-gray one surrounding an older woman. She emerged from a campus building carrying a bundle of books. I’d seen her in the library before. She was on the staff.

“How much longer are we going to do this?” Amber tapped her foot on the sidewalk before sneezing loudly. “We’ve done enough circles around campus I’m pretty sure we’re all familiar with it.”

“Yeah, Lena. This is getting a little boring, and I’m hungry.” Mica slapped a hand over her stomach when it rumbled.

I sighed. For the last hour, I’d pushed everyone to keep going even though they had all voiced that they felt comfortable with the campus layout. “Sorry. I was hoping I’d find him again so you could all get a good look at him. Maybe we’ll have better luck tomorrow.”

Luke pulled out his phone. “I’m going to check in with Jacinda to make sure she’s okay.” He walked several yards away from the group so he could have his conversation in private.

“Pizza?” Jet asked. “There is some killer pizza at a restaurant not too far from our house. Does that sound good for everyone?”

“I’m always up for a good slice of pepperoni.” Edgar waggled his eyebrows.

“Sorry, guys,” I said. “I promised my best friend I’d meet her for dinner tonight and then do some studying. Catch up with you all later?”

Everyone murmured a reply and began walking back to our apartment.

Only Flint stayed behind. “I’ll walk you to the restaurant.”

I cocked my head and leaned up on my tiptoes to kiss him. “I’ll be fine. You can join everyone else.”

His eyebrows bunched together. “I’ll walk you.”

His tone left no room for argument. Rolling my eyes, I threaded my fingers through his as we began heading in the direction of the Thai

restaurant.

But my thoughts quickly turned to what we'd been doing that afternoon. Somewhere nearby was that black-clouded man, and I'd be damned if I wouldn't find him again.

CHAPTER FIVE

I dug into my huge plate of pad thai and sighed in bliss when the peanut flavor coated my tongue.

"This econ test is going to be the death of me." Grace grumbled from across our booth. She waved a list of everything she needed to know for her final exam. Steam rolled up from her bowl of red curry. She dipped her spoon into it and took another bite. "I barely got a B on the midterm. Remind me again why I thought this would be a good elective to take? I just want this semester to be over."

I nodded sympathetically and sucked a noodle into my mouth. "It's almost done. Just get through your final, and then you can say goodbye to econ forever."

Her blue eyes twinkled. "Can you believe we only have two years left after this? We'll be halfway through college!"

A laugh bubbled out of my lips as I reached for my soda.

Since our booth in the Thai restaurant butted up to a window, the setting sun blazed onto our table. Outside, other students and passersby strolled along.

"It is hard to believe. Who would have thought—" My reply was cut short when a wave of raw, hungry energy hit me. Grace was too preoccupied to notice. She was busy dabbing a dot of curry from her shirt.

I swiveled my head around and searched for the source of the energy just as I flicked the switch in the back of my mind. The world turned into a sea of clouds as the din from the restaurant filled my ears.

I gasped when a black cloud appeared around a man just outside the restaurant. He stood near the curb, leaning against a large SUV parked in the street.

"Lena?"

A faint part of my mind registered that Grace had finished cleaning her shirt and was trying to get my attention, but my gaze stayed on the man.

He wore a hooded sweatshirt, jeans, and sturdy boots. Since his head was dipped down while he stared at his cell phone, I couldn't see his face. It didn't help that he wore a baseball cap pulled low over his forehead, but that didn't matter. His cloud had the same energy as the one I'd seen the other day. I could feel it.

It's him!

I knew he was the man I'd seen on campus. I was as sure of that as I was that the sky was blue and the earth was round. The man looked and felt exactly the same—same muscular stocky build. Same dark hair.

Same cloud.

And if there was one thing I knew with every fiber of my being it was that clouds didn't lie.

The ugly black cloud pulsed around him, twisting and rising around his shoulders. He was going to hurt someone, and soon, or—at the very least—he was planning to. My mouth went dry as I reached frantically for my phone.

"Lena! Earth to Lena!" Grace's yell finally pulled me back to our surroundings.

"What?" I met her gaze just long enough to acknowledge her before I whipped my head back in the direction of the man as I continued to frantically search for my phone.

He lifted his head, but I still couldn't see his face clearly since he was turned. His gaze had trained on the door of the restaurant.

"I asked if you're almost done. We should get going to the library. I'm stuffed." She rifled around in her purse before pulling out a pack of chewing gum. She held out a piece to me. "Do you want one?"

The bell on the restaurant door jingled.

A woman stepped onto the sidewalk from the Thai restaurant. She was carrying a bag of takeout. A phone was pressed to her ear as she laughed at something the person on the other end of the line was saying.

"Um . . . Hello, Lena . . . Gum?"

A small smile spread across the man's face. He took a step toward her.

The woman walked down the sidewalk. One hand carried the takeout while the other held her phone. She had no idea she was being followed.

My heart pounded in my chest. *He's going to follow her home!*

They passed by the window next to our booth. The woman appeared around my age with long brown hair and full lips. I felt certain she was the

same woman the man had been following on campus. *Who knows how many days he's been following her.*

When I turned my wide eyes to the man again, I groaned in frustration. He'd pulled the hoodie up on his sweatshirt. Between that, the low cap, and how he kept his face turned, I still wasn't able to see him clearly.

"Lena? Are you suddenly deaf?" Grace's inquisitive eyes narrowed.

"I have to go!" I dug around in my purse again for my phone and groaned in frustration when I couldn't find it. *Really, Lena? Of all the times you have to lose something, it has to be now?*

"What do you mean you 'have to go'?" Grace cocked her head. She snapped her gum and blew a bubble.

"I'm so sorry, Grace, but I'm not going to make it to the library. I'll explain later." I pulled three twenty-dollar bills from my wallet and threw them on the table, more than enough for our meal and a tip, but I didn't have time to wait for the bill. "I'll call you later. Promise!"

With that, I dashed out of the booth and ran to the front door.

"Lena! What the heck?" Grace's voice followed but, I didn't stop.

A blast of cool evening air hit my cheeks when I flew through the door. I turned in the direction the man and young woman had been walking.

Crap!

They were already at the end of the block. The woman turned the corner, and the man followed. He was walking ten feet behind her.

I took off at a run. A group of young men and women yelled after me when I pushed through their group. I was in too much of a hurry to yell an apology over my shoulder.

Damn purse! Where's my phone!

I was still rummaging around in my bag as I sprinted to the corner. I didn't have any luck finding it, so slung my bag over my shoulder and stopped trying. If only I had telepathy like Jet and Jasper, then I could have mentally called somebody in my family to help me. But I had no time. I couldn't stop now if I wanted to catch up to the man and save the woman.

The street the woman had turned onto wasn't as busy as the one by the restaurant. Only a few people were ahead of me. I slowed to a jog since the dark-clouded man and woman were within eyeshot again. The last thing I wanted to do was alert him to my presence.

Skipping over a puddle in the sidewalk, I tried to keep my footsteps quiet. When I was within twenty feet of the man, I slowed to a walk.

A buzzing vibration filled my jacket pocket. With a roll of my eyes, I pulled out my cell phone, which had apparently been stored in the front pocket of my spring coat. *Now I remember leaving it here.*

Grace's picture flashed on the screen.

Even though I felt guilty about how I had abruptly left our dinner, I pushed the Ignore button before flipping my phone to silent. I didn't want anything to alert the dark-clouded man to my presence. *I'll call Grace later and explain.*

Ahead, the woman stopped at a crosswalk. The light was red, and a steady stream of traffic drove by. She was still on her cell phone, chatting away, completely oblivious to the two people pursuing her.

The dark-clouded man stopped as well and leaned against a building. He shifted his weight lazily to one leg and propped an ankle over his other foot. Pulling out his phone, he pretended to be typing in a text as he stood there.

Considering I could see that his phone was not lit up, I knew it was all a ruse. It only solidified that he was truly stalking this girl.

I slipped behind a potted plant so I wouldn't draw attention to myself and hastily texted Flint.

I found him. He walked by the Thai restaurant where Grace and I were eating. I'm following him right now. He's currently pursuing the same girl I saw the other day.

Within two seconds of sending the text, an incoming call lit up my screen. Flint's dashingly handsome face filled it. His chestnut hair was mussed, and his dark eyes twinkled. It was one of my favorite pictures of him, which was why I used it as his contact pic in my phone.

I already knew he wasn't happy even though I didn't answer his call.

Glancing up from where I was hiding, I was relieved to see that the woman and dark-clouded man hadn't moved. She was still talking on her phone while waiting for the light.

I typed in another text. ***I can't talk now. I don't want to alert him to me***.

Peeking up again, I tried to see what street I was on, but the street sign was too far away. Groaning in frustration, I typed in another text.

I'm going to keep following them. I know he's going to hurt her. Sorry, I know you're worried, but I can't stop. I'll stay safe. Promise. xo

I had no doubt Flint was pulling his hair out. He hated when I did this kind of stuff, but I couldn't wait for my family to arrive and help. And I wasn't stupid. I would stay safe and not do anything that would put me in harm's way, but I also couldn't stand by if I could prevent the dark-clouded man from attacking this woman.

The light turned green, and the crosswalk sign flashed white. The girl started crossing as her take-out food swung from her arm.

The dark-clouded man pushed away from the building and tucked his phone back into his pocket.

I waited a few seconds before following, but I must not have been as quiet as I thought.

The man glanced over his shoulder in my direction.

I hastily kneeled and pretended to be tying my shoelace. Making sure to keep my face pointed downward, I peeked up briefly to see what he was doing.

He had turned back around and was pursuing the woman again.

Crap. That was close. I really needed to be better at not drawing attention to myself.

Falling back, I let another ten feet of distance spread between us. At the next block, the woman stopped and walked up a set of stairs to an apartment building. Her keys were out and jingled in her hand. Cradling her phone against her shoulder, she inserted a key into the lock.

The dark-clouded man slowed his pace. He pulled out his phone again and pretended to be typing. Instead, he lifted it and snapped a picture of the woman.

Red coated my gaze. He was truly stalking her. Not only was he following her, but he was also taking pictures of her.

My chest rose and fell as hot anger rolled through me.

Oblivious to everything happening around her, the woman stepped into her apartment building as cars continued to mill by on the street. She shut the door, and her bubbly laugh disappeared.

I slid into the closest alleyway and plastered myself against a wall. Peeking around the corner, I watched the dark-clouded man.

He took a few more photos of her building before putting his phone back in his pocket. From there, he walked down the street again.

I breathed a sigh of relief that he didn't appear intent on attacking the woman right then, but what he was doing was pretty obvious. He was following her, getting to know her habits, figuring out where she lived. It was only a matter of time before he returned and did something more sinister.

Another buzz emitted from my pocket. I knew either Grace or Flint was calling again, but if I stopped to talk to them, I could lose him.

Looking toward the sky, I sent a silent apology to my best friend and boyfriend through the cosmic void. I once again hit the Ignore button on my phone and continued following the dark-clouded man.

CHAPTER SIX

With each second that passed, the sun set more. Streetlights clicked on as I followed the man down the road. He seemed to be walking toward a residential area. The foot traffic grew less and less.

My heart pounded in my chest like a jackhammer. The last time I'd experienced an adrenaline rush like this had been when my family and I had played laser tag a month ago. The twins had been in hot pursuit of me as I led them on a relentless chase. We'd been prohibited from using our powers during that game, so I had not had an advantage.

At the next block, the man turned left. Leaves fluttered on a nearby tree. The wind was picking up as humid air swirled around. A strong gust picked up my hair and blew it across my face.

I scrambled to push the long curls behind my ears. When I finally had my annoying hair under control, my insides froze. The dark-clouded man had crossed the street and stopped.

He was staring at me.

He had stopped at least fifteen yards away, but he stood completely still in the center of the sidewalk. He made no attempt to hide the fact that he was watching me. To make matters worse, he'd donned sunglasses despite the darkening hour. Since his hoodie was still pulled up, I couldn't make out any of his features.

Forcing myself to keep walking, I tried to act like any other pedestrian and carried on in my original direction. I felt his eyes follow me.

My heart pounded even more.

Losing my nerve, I turned right at the next block despite him waiting on the left across the road. Shallow breaths filled my chest when I ducked into the first store I found.

Bright lights accosted me. Apparently, I was in a corner convenience store. Rows of snacks, commonly used groceries, and miscellaneous paraphernalia filled the aisles.

A middle-aged shopkeeper hunkered over the front counter. An open magazine was spread out in front of him. He smiled. “Good evening, Miss. Can I help you find something?”

I wasn’t surprised at his warm greeting since I was standing in the entryway like a deer caught in headlights. “Um . . . no, I’m . . .”

I turned and cracked the door open behind me before peeking back onto the street. In the distance, the dark-clouded man was retreating once again. He was at least two blocks away.

“Miss?” the shopkeeper called. “Can I help you?”

“No. Never mind!” I called before slipping out of the store.

I picked up a jog and returned to the intersection. The dark-clouded man was now only one block ahead of me. Trying my best to keep my footsteps light, I once again followed him.

If I can just find out where he lives or catch a license-plate number on his vehicle, it’s possible we can figure out who he is.

I was so busy coming up with my plan of attack that I didn’t realize he’d disappeared.

Coming to a halt on the sidewalk, I swiveled my gaze left and right. I no longer saw him ahead of me. *Did he turn off somewhere?*

I kept my vision in its altered state, hoping his cloud would appear from around a building or vehicle.

It didn’t.

Just as I was about to turn back the way I had come, I felt him.

Raw, hungry, pulsing energy pummeled into my back.

Adrenaline surged through me as I whipped around. Somehow, he’d darted out of the way and had sneaked up behind me. *Does that mean he knew I was following him?*

I spread my feet wide as I prepared myself to confront him, but when I turned a one-eighty, my mouth dropped.

Nobody was behind me.

I followed the feel of the pulsing energy cloud. *There. In the alleyway.*

He’d darted into an alley and was currently watching me from the shadows. Terror slid through me. Since I was facing him, that meant he could see my face.

But I still couldn’t see his.

I could barely make out his stocky frame.

Since there was no point pretending that I hadn't been following him, I flew off the sidewalk to duck behind a potted tree that stood by another apartment building. As I licked my dry lips, my thoughts raced with what to do next.

But I didn't have the opportunity to come up with a new plan. Pounding footsteps sounded in the alley, growing fainter and fainter. He was running away.

I guess that means I'm following him.

Just as I pushed away from the building to pursue him again, a car came careening around the corner.

My stomach dropped.

Flint's cloud pulsed out of the vehicle. His energy was triple its normal size.

He pulled the SUV to a squealing stop just across the road before jumping out. There was no point running after the man. Since I could no longer hear his footsteps, and since my boyfriend was approaching me at a menacingly fast pace, my nighttime excursion had come to an end.

"Lena! What the hell are you doing?" Flint reached me on the sidewalk and stared down at me with hard eyes. Anger simmered off of him, but it was tinged with something else—fear.

I wrung my hands as I gave him a look that I hoped evoked sympathy. "I had to follow him, Flint! I'm sorry. I know you've been worried, but I'm fine."

He crushed me in an embrace. His steel-like arms and scent surrounded me. "You can't do that, babe. I know you want to catch this guy, but chasing him by yourself is not the answer."

The anger in his cloud dissipated as raw fear filled it. I knew more than ever that my time locked away in Marcus's mansion still haunted him. He had the same terrified sound in his voice as he'd had when I'd been taken in San Francisco.

I pulled back, having to pry his arms loose, before I reached up and laid a palm gently across his cheek. Heat from his skin seared my hand. "It doesn't matter, anyway. He got away. I'm sorry I frightened you."

A growl of irritation rumbled from his chest, but he still tilted his head and kissed my inner wrist—right where my tattoo was.

A shiver ran up my arm.

"Don't do that again," he said. "Promise me."

I sighed loudly but nodded. “Fine. I won’t chase him again by myself.” I pushed my hair behind my shoulder. The wind was really picking up. “How did you find me, anyway?”

He pulled his phone from his pocket and held it up. A tracking app was open.

I propped a hand on my hip. “You tracked my phone’s location?”

“Can you blame me? I have a girlfriend who is currently on a suicide mission. Of course I downloaded an app so I can track you.”

Annoyance flared in me again, but I didn’t want to spend our time arguing about this. We had more important things to discuss.

I ran a hand through my hair when the wind ruffled the curls resting on my shoulders. “We might as well head home. We have a lot to talk about. Because if there’s one thing I’m certain about, it’s that this guy is definitely intent on attacking that girl.”

~ ~ ~

Back at our apartment, the twins and Mica listened raptly while I described my evening, whereas Di, Flint, and Raven crossed their arms and mumbled their displeasure. Amber, Edgar, and Luke all listened with raised eyebrows, shock apparent on their faces.

“So you didn’t get a good look at him at all?” Mica asked incredulously.

“No. All I can describe is his build and hair color.”

“Let me get this straight.” Luke slung an arm across the couch back. His wide shoulders filled half the seating. “You’re having dinner with a friend. You see the mysterious clouded man again, so you jump up and leave the restaurant—and leave your friend—to chase him at night by yourself. He then sees you and watches you while you’re *alone*. Did I get that right?” His eyes flickered to golden.

“Well . . .” I wrung my hands as Flint’s energy grew. Luke’s comment also reminded me that I really needed to call Grace. Six text messages from her, which I had yet to respond to, were currently waiting on my phone. “I suppose when you put it like that it seems a bit . . .”

“Impulsive?” Di raised a midnight eyebrow.

I rolled my eyes. “I know. I know. I’m still working on that lovely trait of mine, but for the most part, I don’t do stuff like that anymore. You know

that, and seriously, you guys, are you really telling me I should have left it? I now know where this girl lives. We can watch her apartment building and, hopefully, catch this guy."

"Strong work, Lena." Jet clapped me on the back. "I, for one, like your style."

Jasper and Mica snickered, which got annoyed looks from Flint and Di.

Raven leaned forward from where he was sitting on the couch by Flint. Since he wasn't wearing his contact lenses, his eyes were swirling colors of orange, like embers burning in a fire. "We were really worried about you, Lena. I don't think it's wise to do something like that again."

Raven's quiet voice and levelheaded response reminded me so much of Di. Flint had said something very similar during the ride back to our apartment after he picked me up. However, Flint's words had been a bit more heated and colorful.

"I know, Raven. I'm sorry I worried you guys."

Amber nudged Edgar. "Let's go make a snack. I have a feeling it's going to be a long night."

Edgar shrugged and ran a hand over his shaved head. "Sure, love."

They disappeared into the kitchen of our small apartment. The sounds and scents of popping popcorn soon filled the air.

"Oooh, I love popcorn!" Mica exclaimed when they returned carrying two large bowls. She grabbed a huge handful. A few kernels dropped onto the fake-wood linoleum floor. Mica picked them up and popped them into her mouth.

Di paced the living room a few times as everyone else chewed popcorn. Since our apartment was a two-bedroom, it was spacious for Flint and me, but with our family added, things felt a bit crowded. Di's energy wasn't helping. It swelled around her, making me feel claustrophobic.

Pulling my cloud from my shoulders, I created my protective bubble before snatching a handful of popcorn from the bowl that got passed around. Considering I'd left most of my pad thai on my plate at the restaurant, I was starving.

"So we'll stake out this woman's home and watch for the dark-clouded man Lena saw." Di tapped a finger to her mouth as she paced. "As soon as we see him, we follow him to his home or vehicle. Using that information, Jasper or Flint will hack into the DMV's database to retrieve his

information and then . . . what?" She stopped and faced everyone. "We wait for him to attack? Alert the police with our suspicions? What's the next course of action?"

I frowned. Now that she mentioned it, she had a point. Just what exactly did we do *after* we figured out who he was?

"The police aren't going to do anything." Jasper brought his knees up and looped his muscled forearms around them. He sat on the floor beside Mica, who had claimed an entire bowl of popcorn for herself. "Having a suspicion that someone is going to do something won't get their attention. We'll need proof he's up to something."

"But he *is* going to attack her!" My voice rose at the thought of that happening and nobody stopping it.

"Shh." Flint pulled me back against his side and rubbed my back.

"But we have to stop him. Police or not. We can't let him hurt her!" My cheeks heated. Just the thought of not stopping him made me want to scream in frustration.

"I know, Lena, and we will." Di put her hands on her hips as a dark lock of hair fell across her forehead. "But since we don't have a clear course of action, I suppose we'll have to take this one step at a time—the first step being identifying the creep, which means we're spending the night outside of that girl's apartment building. This would be a lot easier if we had Susannah to help us with lookout. Has anyone heard from her?"

Jet grimaced. "No. Let's just hope my car's still in one piece."

Amber grabbed a tissue from the end table before bringing it to her nose. "Do you think she got carried away again and decided to take off on a regional flight?"

It wouldn't be the first time that Susannah would have lost herself while in her eagle form. While she was doing better than she had been eighteen months ago, she was still so in tune with her animal nature that she sometimes disappeared for days at a time. We didn't worry too much. So far, she'd always returned.

Di sighed loudly. "I'll talk with her when she shows up. In the meantime, who wants to spend the night watching this girl's apartment?"

My hand shot into the air.

Flint's energy grew. Thankfully, my protective bubble deflected it. He raised his hand next.

"I'll go." Raven raised his hand after Flint.

“No way we’re missing this!” Jet flicked a peace sign as Jasper and Mica grinned.

“Count the three of us in!” Mica added.

Amber yawned just before she sneezed loudly. “Since that’s six of you, I’ll stay behind. I think I’m getting a cold, so I might go to bed early. Can I take the shift tomorrow?” She sneezed again before sniffing.

“If you’re getting sick, then yes, you definitely stay here,” Di replied. “Luke and Edgar?”

“I’ll stay back for tonight.” Luke pulled out his cell phone. “I’ll give Jacinda another call while these six are down there. You can count me in for tomorrow if we need to keep watching her place.”

“Will you tell Jacinda I won’t have time to call her tonight?” I asked Luke.

“Not a problem,” he replied.

Edgar nodded. “I’ll go tomorrow too.”

“So it’s settled then.” Di turned to the six of us. “You all watch her place tonight, and the four of us will go tomorrow. Hopefully, Susannah will be back by then so she can join us.”

The twins and Mica whooped before they stood to grab their jackets.

Flint’s eyebrows knit together while Raven’s swirling orange irises brightened.

“Just let me do one thing before we leave.” I stood from the couch and jogged to the bedroom before closing the door behind me. Our bed was a jumbled mess of sheets, but Flint had cleaned up. The floor was clear of clothes. I pulled out my phone and tapped in Grace’s number.

She answered on the first ring. “So you’re alive?” Her sharp tone carried through the line.

I winced. “I’m sorry, Grace. I’m really sorry for leaving the restaurant like that.”

She sighed. “I’m just glad you’re okay and that you finally called me back. What the heck happened? Why did you leave like that?”

I cradled the phone against my shoulder and debated how to answer her. The truth, obviously, was out of the question. Since Grace had no idea about my family, our origins, or what we could all do, I couldn’t exactly tell her what our plan tonight was.

After biting my lip, I replied, “I saw somebody I knew.” I left it at that, figuring that sticking somewhat to the truth was the best course of action.

“Somebody you knew?” She sounded skeptical. “So you raced out of the restaurant to track down this person you knew?”

“Yep.”

“And you didn’t bring them back for me to meet?” Her tone grew hurt.

Guilt bit me sharply. “Oh, I know, but you know me. Sometimes I get a bit carried away.” I said the words flippantly, hoping my somewhat scatterbrained actions could be used as an excuse for my current behavior. “We got to talking, and I lost track of time.”

Grace sighed heavily. “All right, fine, but that was still rude. Next time, at least tell me you’re going after someone before you take off like that. I was really worried about you.” A hint of irritation still coated her words.

“Sorry, Grace. Next time, I’ll do that.”

Popping gum sounds came through the line. “I’m still at the library right now if you want to join me. Oh, and I have fifteen dollars for you. The sixty dollars you left was a little excessive. I left an exact twenty-percent tip and kept the rest to give back to you.”

Her pert words made me smile. I could just imagine her pulling out her calculator to calculate the appropriate tip based on the bill’s amount.

“Keep it,” I replied. “Think of it as a gift for me flaking out on you tonight.”

She scoffed. “Don’t be silly. I have it set aside in my wallet to give back to you next time I see you.”

Her indignation made me laugh.

“So are you coming down here?”

My smiled vanished. “I can’t tonight. Don’t be mad, okay?”

A few seconds of silence passed before she said, “Lena, are you sure everything’s okay?”

I swallowed tightly. I hated lying to her, but I didn’t really have a choice. “I’m fine. Really. Talk to you tomorrow?”

“Okay, but you know you can talk to me if something’s wrong. Right?”

“Yeah, I know. Thanks, bestie.”

We hung up, and guilt filled me. I just hoped we found this guy soon so we could get back to our normal lives, which *didn’t* involve lying to my best friend.

CHAPTER SEVEN

My conversation with Grace filled my mind as I raced to catch up with everyone else. My secret ability and my family's beginnings had been an awkward point to navigate a few times in our friendship, but it had never been like this. I'd never downright lied to Grace before. I chewed my lip as I stuffed my feet into my boots.

"Everything okay?" Flint's dark gaze bored into mine as he stood by me in the entryway.

After a quick glance out the window, I saw that Mica, Jet, Jasper, and Raven were already in the parking lot, waiting in the SUV. Flint had obviously stayed behind to wait for me.

"Not really. I just lied to Grace."

Flint cocked his head. "Did you lie about where you went after the restaurant?"

I nodded and swung my coat on.

He put his hands on his hips. "Well, that's another good reason to never do something like that again. You wouldn't need to lie to your best friend."

I made a face at him as I pulled the door open. "Thanks for making me feel better."

His scowl followed me as we trailed down the hall. "But I'm right, Lena. What you did tonight was dangerous, and now you're feeling guilty over how you treated Grace. If you'd thought of that before you shot out of the restaurant, none of this would have happened."

With a huff, I pushed open the stairwell door. "And if I *hadn't*, we would have no idea where this girl lived. That guy could be intent on attacking her tonight, and now we may be able to stop him."

Flint's energy pounded into my back. "Or you could have alerted him to your interest. What if he backs off now?"

I bit my lip. I hadn't thought of that. "I guess we'll find out tonight."

Flint’s disapproval continued to wash over me. As I pushed through the exterior door to the parking lot, I welled up my energy inside me, pulled my cloud off my shoulders, and wrapped it protectively around my body. Cool evening air swirled outside.

Our feet tapped on the pavement as we walked briskly to the car. It wasn’t the first time my impulsiveness had gotten me in trouble, and it wasn’t the first time Flint had been angry with me for acting without thinking.

However, it *was* the first time in months that we’d been butting heads like this. Every day, we had an argument which was not like us.

“About time!” Mica exclaimed when Flint and I slid into the vehicle.

Flint and I sat in the very back of the large SUV. Raven and Jasper sat in the middle, while Mica and Jet occupied the front seats.

Jet sat behind the wheel. He kept looking through the front windshield as his eyes wandered up and down the road.

“What are you looking for?” I asked as I clicked my seat belt into place.

“Susannah still isn’t back.”

Jasper smirked. “I know you’re pretending to be concerned for her safety, but you don’t fool me. It’s really your car you’re thinking about, isn’t it?”

Jet scowled at him, which got a laugh from Mica.

“Just own it, bro,” Mica said from the front passenger seat. “We all know Susannah is more than capable in her eagle form. She’ll be fine.”

Jet sighed and ran a hand through his curly dark hair. His blue eyes flashed in the light from the parking-lot lamp. “Fine. Yes, it’s my car I’m worried about. I see now I probably shouldn’t have loaned it to her.”

“Let’s discuss this later.” Flint’s clipped reply stopped their banter.

Since I was directly behind Raven, the brothers were closest to me. However, their energies couldn’t be more different. Flint’s energy was raw and pounding, whereas Raven’s was calm and soothing.

I inched forward, closer to Raven.

The drive back to the girl’s apartment building was quick. She didn’t live far from the university, and considering I’d first seen the dark-clouded man following her on campus, I knew she was a student.

“So what’s the plan?” Jet parked at the curb a block from her building. The wind still rustled through the streets. The gusts were particularly strong

tonight.

Raven put a knit cap on. “I say we surround the building and keep an eye on all of the exits and entrances. That way, if the guy comes back, we’ll be able to see him coming or going.”

Mica angled her body closer to the windshield and looked up. Her eyes narrowed. “There’s a metal stairwell attached to the side of the building. I thought I saw something poking up from the roof. So that’s another angle he could use to enter the building. Who’s to say he won’t break in through a window?”

I tried to see whatever Mica had seen but couldn’t. She’d probably zoomed in on the object using her enhanced eyesight.

I straightened in my seat before saying, “So there’s a stairwell up the side of the building that he could use to access a window, and there are probably several entrances and exits.”

Jasper tapped a finger on his chin. “It’s not just windows he could use. Do you think it’s possible to get on top of the building? Perhaps there’s a door up there for maintenance access.”

“Possibly,” Jet replied. “Flint would have an easy time getting on the roof to watch that.”

“So we all split up?” I asked. “Flint will obviously go up the stairwell to the roof. Does everybody have their phones so we can keep in touch?”

Flint scowled heavily at me. “I think it would be better if we stayed in pairs. Especially since this guy has seen you, Lena. Who’s to say he wouldn’t do something to you if he saw you again?”

Jasper shrugged. “He has a point. Okay. Pairs it is, and if Jet and I split up, we can keep in touch with each other. That would eliminate needing to text or call. Mica?” Jasper winked at his girlfriend. “You gonna be my partner in crime?”

“You know it!” She beamed.

“I’ll go with Lena,” Flint said before I could suggest teaming up with Raven.

Mica gave me an amused look and whispered, “Surprise, surprise.”

I rolled my eyes but nodded at my—overprotective, incredibly sexy, drove-me-crazy-at-times-but-I-still-couldn’t-live-without-him—boyfriend. “You must think my climbing-metal-stairwell skills are up to par.”

His eyes glittered in the dim cab before he dipped his head down and brushed his lips against my ears. “I have a solution to that.”

My traitorous body shivered when his lips grazed my neck. He pulled back and gave me a knowing look.

Jet jutted his chin toward Raven. “Guess that leaves you and me, bro.”

“Works for me,” Raven replied.

“Anyone want to take bets about this guy showing up tonight?” Jet rubbed his hands together and grinned. “I bet he does, and I bet Lena takes him down. I’d love to see his face when Lena blasts him with an energy ball. That would be priceless!”

The twins chuckled, which got a scowl from Flint. “This isn’t a game, you two. Somebody could get seriously hurt.”

That declaration sobered the twins.

“So Jet and Raven go to the back of the building, and Jasper and I go to the front?” Mica raised her eyebrows. “Since apparently Lena and Flint are taking the roof?”

“Sounds like a plan, man.” Jet opened his door, and a rush of cool air swirled into the cab.

“Everybody put your phones on silent, but leave them on vibrate so we don’t miss any text messages or calls.” Flint pulled out his phone to change the sound settings. Everyone else followed.

Raven gave my arm a brief squeeze before he and Jet departed. I could tell from the sympathetic look in his eyes that he knew Flint and I had been arguing.

“Everything okay between you two?” he asked quietly.

I shrugged. “As okay as it can be, considering.”

He gave me one last squeeze before letting go.

“Should we meet back here around dawn if he never shows up?” Mica zipped her jacket all the way up. It was definitely getting cooler.

Flint nodded. “That’s a good meeting time.”

“Stay warm, folks!” Jet saluted everyone before turning.

I watched as Raven and Jet walked away. Physically, Raven closely resembled Flint. They were both tall with broad shoulders, strong lean builds, and olive complexions. Personality-wise, they were similar too, but Raven wasn’t quite as hotheaded as Flint. If anything, the younger brother was more sensitive. He had an uncanny knack of picking up on people’s emotions. For someone who had grown up isolated in a mansion, he was surprisingly in tune with the people around him.

Jasper and Mica took off next. Flint and I waited a few minutes before following.

I knew a long night awaited, and we would be tired come morning, but I didn't care. I wanted to catch this guy more than anything. The last time I'd felt this kind of anger and resentment had been when Marcus had imprisoned me in California before transporting me to his mansion.

Our feet tapped on the sidewalk as we walked toward the building.

I peeked up at my boyfriend. "We'll need to be careful so nobody sees us. Who knows how rickety that fire escape is. If any of her neighbors hear us climbing up it, they may call the police."

Flint nodded. "I was just thinking the same thing."

Considering the energy coming off him was dark and strong, I knew he was still mad at me.

I sighed heavily. I didn't like the animosity flowing between us, but I would be damned if I apologized. I would have redone everything tonight if I'd had to. Even though Flint didn't want to see it my way, I knew I was right. If I hadn't followed the dark-clouded man, we wouldn't have known where the girl lived.

When we reached the edge of the brick apartment building, Flint discreetly pulled me into the alleyway. It was dark and damp. Small puddles of rainwater sloshed against our feet when we walked quietly back to the fire escape.

The apartment buildings around here were all similar, mostly brick and around three stories tall. Each building probably held twelve individual apartments. They weren't big, but they still had a lot of windows that could be broken into.

"At least it's not raining." I gave Flint a nudge as our feet tapped quietly on the asphalt.

A reluctant smile spread across his face. "I guess you have a point."

His energy dipped a little as I felt the mood between us shift.

When we reached the stairwell, we stopped. The sound of a car driving by drifted into the alleyway, and someone two stories up was playing music. An Ed Sheeran song was faint through their windows.

"What's the best way to reach that?" I nodded at the ladder, which was ten feet above us. In the event of a fire, the occupants inside the building could release it from above, but it would cause quite a ruckus if we tried to pull it down.

“I thought that would be obvious.” Flint gave me a crooked smile. “I’ll jump us up there.”

A thrill ran through me. Normally, we kept our powers under wraps. It was too much of a risk to alert people to our abilities if we didn’t keep them hidden. But every now and then, we let loose. If we were at our secluded cabin in the Canadian Rockies, or if we ventured back to Pete and Val’s ranch for a weekend visit and wandered into the woods, we didn’t need to hide anything. Those excursions were so freeing.

Flint swung me onto his back, and I locked my arms and legs around his neck and waist. Another thrill that had nothing to do with our adventure shot through me. The feel of his hard body and shifting muscles beneath my limbs created a swell of desire inside me.

“Ready?” His voice turned husky.

I nodded and leaned down to nibble his ear. “Whenever you are.” This was so much better than arguing.

His large hands curled around my thighs and squeezed. Heat seared off his palms. “Try not to distract me. I won’t be quiet with you doing things like that.”

I giggled softly before obeying his request.

With a bend of his knees, Flint launched us into the air. The air whooshed around me as gravity pushed me down. The next second, we were standing on the stairwell platform. Flint landed as lightly as a cat, his joints flexing like well-oiled hinges.

He didn’t stop. With movements so quick that we became a blur, he raced up the stairs, and the next thing I knew, we were standing on the building’s roof.

My breath caught in my throat as familiar nausea rolled in my stomach. Regardless of the hundreds of times Flint had moved me at his speed, I still wasn’t used to it. It always caused me to feel a little sick.

“Are you okay?” His soft question pulled me back to the present when he slid me down his back.

In a flash, he turned and had his arms around me to keep me steady.

I tilted my face up to meet his and smiled. “Just give me a minute. I’ll be fine.”

He pushed my long dark-red curls behind my shoulder and leaned down to kiss me softly on the mouth. “Sorry. I know it’s jarring for you.”

I mumbled something halfway intelligible. He was now doing amazing things to my neck. *So much better than fighting!*

After planting a soft kiss just below my ear, he said, “I hate when we argue. Can we try to forget our earlier argument?”

It seemed I wasn’t the only one wishing things were smoother between us. I curled my fingers around the nape of his neck and pulled him closer. “Of course. I’d much rather be doing this with you.”

He chuckled softly before kissing me again.

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The next four hours passed slowly. Thankfully, our agreement to stop arguing had held. For the first time in days, the mood between us felt normal.

To pass the time and keep watch, Flint and I wandered back and forth across the roof to keep an eye on the apartment-building windows. My earlier suspicions about the building’s size seemed correct. It didn’t appear to be a large structure. I guessed no more than a dozen apartments filled the building. A few times, residents came and went through the front doors, but other than that, it was pretty quiet.

Each time an occupant came or went, Mica sent me a text to describe each person’s appearances. None of them fit the description of the dark-clouded man or the girl he had been following.

From our rooftop view, keeping an eye on the twins, Mica and Raven, was easy. Mica and Jasper were stationed across the street from the front of the building. They hid from view behind a dumpster in an alleyway. Conversely, Raven and Jet hid behind large utility boxes in the back of the building in the small parking lot.

Around eleven at night, I jumped when the same girl I’d seen earlier, reappeared on the asphalt in the back parking lot. She had changed. Sweatpants and a loose T-shirt covered her frame, but I still recognized her. From the apartment door, she dashed to a parked car. After retrieving a bag from the trunk, she hurried back inside.

I scrambled to pick up my phone. “That’s her!” I nearly yelled when Raven picked up.

Below, Raven bolted to a standing position. When the girl retreated back to the apartment building, he followed her.

I held my breath.

From above, Flint and I watched Raven slip into the building after her. She seemed oblivious to him.

I gritted my teeth. *This girl really needs to take a class in being aware of her surroundings.*

“What’s he doing?” I asked Flint.

“Not sure.”

A few minutes passed by, and Raven appeared again. He slipped out of the building as silently as he’d gone in.

I typed in a quick text. ***What did you do?***

His reply came back immediately. **I followed her to her apartment so we’d know which one is hers. She lives on the east side, second floor, toward the back.**

A grin spread across my face. “He followed her to her apartment! She lives on this side, floor two.” I pointed down the side of the building. “Those are the windows we should watch.”

In the moonlight, Flint’s gaze shone with pride. “Someone thinks quickly on his feet.”

The moon and constellations trailed across the night sky as Flint and I kept watch over the girl’s apartment. Since we knew which one was hers, keeping watch over her was much easier.

But with each minute that passed, my disappointment grew. We had yet to see the dark-clouded man, and a sinking feeling in my stomach made me wonder if Flint was right. Maybe seeing me earlier had spooked him away.

In which case, we may never catch him. If he had any concerns that we were on to him, he’d probably find a new victim. It was possible we wouldn’t stop him at all.

“I think I should get into the building.” Flint’s abrupt words carried through the night breeze.

My cell phone declared the time as one in the morning.

“What do you want to do in the building?” I wrapped my arms around myself as a shiver struck me. Despite summer being around the corner, nighttime still felt cool.

“Since we know what apartment she’s in, with any luck we can find her name on her mailbox. With her name, we can hack into the university database and figure out her class schedule. It will give us something to go off of. If we know her class schedule, we know where she’ll be. It will make following her easier.”

I grinned. “That’s a great idea! But how are you going to get into the building? You need a key.”

Flint unzipped his jacket and pulled something from his pocket. “I may have come prepared.”

My smile grew when I saw the small packet of lock-picking tools. I lunged the distance between us and wrapped my arms around his neck before giving him a huge kiss. “I love when you surprise me like that.”

He chuckled deeply before kissing me back. “The night wouldn’t be complete unless we did something illegal.”

His teasing made me giggle. “Let me send everyone a quick text so they know what you’re going to do.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Jet and Mica's texted replies came quickly. They were fully supportive of Flint breaking in.

"But how are you going to do it without getting caught?" I asked Flint.

Wind whipped over the building and howled through the alleyway. My initial excitement had worn off, and reality was settling in. "What if someone sees you?"

"I'll be fast," he replied. "Besides, it's late. Who will see?"

In a blurred move, Flint was at the building's edge. Six feet down was the fire escape stairwell. He leapt over the edge gracefully and landed on the balls of his feet.

I watched from above with wide eyes as he once again turned into a blur. The next time he appeared, he was on the ground. I blinked, and he was gone.

Breathing heavily, I raced to the back of the building but didn't see him. I raced to the front—still no sign of him.

I hurriedly texted Mica. ***Which way did he go?***

He must be in the back. I don't see him out here.

After running across the rooftop to the back of the building, I gazed below.

A dark shape stood near the back door. I switched my vision. A colorful cloud appeared around the shadow. *Flint.* I shook my head at the lack of security lights. If the dark-clouded man wanted to break into this building, the back door would be the best way to do it.

My heart pounded against my ribs as I watched Flint. The seconds ticked by. *This is taking too long!*

If someone drove into the back parking lot they'd be able to see him, and then they could call the police. Meanwhile, I was stuck up here on the roof.

While I knew I could get down eventually, doing so wouldn't be easy on my own. I certainly wouldn't be as quiet as Flint.

I was just about to type a text to Raven when the door opened.

Flint silently entered the building.

With each second that passed, my worry grew. I was about to call Flint's cell phone when the door opened again. He silently emerged before turning into a blur.

Racing back to the stairwell, I opened my eyes wide as I tried to catch sight of him.

Out of nowhere, an arm encircled my waist from behind.

I shrieked.

A large hand covered my mouth before Flint's scent surrounded me. "Shh . . . We don't want to let anybody know we're up here."

Excitement danced in his eyes when he whirled me around. I punched him lightly on the shoulder. "You scared me on purpose!"

He chuckled deeply. "Now you know how I feel about all the dangerous things you do."

I tried to scowl, but all I ended up doing was laughing. "So what did you find?"

"Her last name is Jonas, and her first initial is A. Couple that with her address, and we should be able to find her information in the school's database. With any luck, I'll be able to hack into the system within a few hours of getting home."

I wrapped my arms around him and kissed him again. In the cool wind, his warm lips felt smooth and firm.

A buzz vibrated my pocket, interrupting us. I pulled my phone out to see a text from Mica.

I think we have trouble. Flashing lights are coming our way.

My grip on the phone tightened. I tilted the phone for Flint to see. "Do you think it's the police?"

He raced to the front of the building with me hot on his heels. Sure enough, about five blocks away was a police car. Its lights flashed brightly in the dark night. It was heading our way, but its siren was silent. That wasn't a good sign.

I hurriedly typed in a response to Mica. ***You guys better get out of here. Just to be safe.***

Her response was immediate. **I already told Jet and Raven. They're leaving too.**

Two figures stood up from behind the dumpster across the street. From how high our rooftop position was, I barely caught Mica and Jasper's outlines as they ran under a streetlight. They retreated farther into the alleyway behind the building across the road.

I ran to the back of the building looked over the edge toward where Raven and Jet had hidden. They were running too. Distant footsteps reached my ears as the two of them sprinted in the opposite direction.

Flint was still at the front of the building, watching the activity below. When I reached his side again, he said in a quiet voice, "It looks like they're coming here."

The police car pulled up to the curb below, its lights continuing to flash. Two officers stepped out onto the road. One hiked his pants up higher as his radio crackled on his shoulder.

I gripped Flint's arm tightly as the police officers strode to the building we stood on. For a moment, a horrifying thought entered my mind. *Did the dark-clouded man return? Did he break into the building somehow without us knowing? Did he attack her after all?*

But since the officers didn't seem in a hurry, I didn't think that was the case. Before the policemen climbed the steps to the building, a figure appeared below.

Since we were so high up, I couldn't make out features, but the woman had pajamas on. She pointed across the street and behind the building.

"Can you hear them?" I asked Flint quietly.

He shook his head.

The female resident suddenly lifted her hand and pointed toward the roof of the building, where Flint and I stood. The policemen arched their necks and glanced skyward. I pulled Flint away from the edge and hunkered down. My eyes flashed wide. "Holy crap! Do you think they know we're up here?"

I gazed at the roof's hard surface beneath our feet. My mouth dropped as something occurred to me. Considering the next words that flowed from

Flint's lips matched my thoughts, we'd obviously reached the same conclusion.

"The residents on the third floor can probably hear us running around." He scowled. "That woman probably knows that somebody is on the roof, or at the very least, she suspects it."

Before I could respond, Flint peeked over the edge again and hissed in a breath. "Shit. They're heading toward the fire escape."

The sound of the ladder being pulled to the ground came next. The rickety sound echoed through the alleyway below.

"What are we going to do?"

"Do you trust me?" Flint's dark gaze bored into mine as the evening wind whipped his chestnut hair around his face.

I nodded. "With my life."

"Climb on my back. We're getting out of here."

I gripped his forearm tightly. "But what about the girl? What if he breaks in after we leave and attacks her?"

Flint's eyes softened. "The police are here. They'll probably be here for a while. She'll stay safe. Now, come on. We need to go."

I swung onto his back just as the sound of the policeman's boots began running up the rickety stairs.

Flint's hands encircled my thighs. "Hold on."

The entire world turned into a blur.

I closed my eyes tightly as Flint rocketed us off the roof. For a moment, we were airborne. I kept my arms and legs wrapped tightly around him and didn't dare breathe. I was too frightened that I would distract him and we'd plummet to our death as he leapt to the next building.

We landed with a thud, but he didn't stop there. Flint sprinted again, and once again we were airborne. It took me a second to realize what he was doing. He was running and leaping from building to building with me clinging to his back, just like Spider-Man on the big screen.

A shout sounded behind us. I didn't know if that meant we'd been spotted by the police or that the policemen were shouting to each other.

We didn't stop to find out.

Nausea rolled through me as Flint landed on another building. When I opened my eyes, I darted a look behind my shoulder. I had no idea which building had been the girl's. Rows of apartment buildings lined the block behind us.

“How are we going to get down?” I asked him.

“It looks like the building ahead is a story lower than this one. I’ll jump us down there, and then we’ll see if we can climb to the ground.”

A rush of air swept over my face as Flint leaped. The world again became a blur.

I dared to open my eyes. I gulped. In that split second, fifty feet of air separated us from the ground. If Flint missed a step or slipped on the roof, both of us could plummet to the ground below. And regardless of our powers, neither of us would survive a fifty-foot fall to concrete.

My body jolted abruptly when Flint landed on the lower roof. He had just jumped us down fifteen feet, and the sudden landing jarred my shoulders. When I hissed in pain, his grip tightened around my thighs.

“Are you okay? Are you hurt?”

I shook my head even though fire burned my limbs. “I’m fine. Keep going.”

He raced to the edge of the building. That was our last hope for getting down. We’d reached the end of the block. At least the police hadn’t driven this way.

“Do you see anything to hold onto?” Flint leaned over the edge. Shiny black shingles lined the roof’s surface. The moon continued to shine down, and the wind ruffled the hair around my shoulders.

“There’s a gutter system right there.” I pointed to the corner and swallowed a wince as I moved my shoulder. “Do you think that would work?”

“It might for you since you’re so light. I’m not sure if it will hold me. I’m going to set you down. Do you feel steady?”

“I’m fine.” I didn’t tell him that my shoulders hurt so badly I feared I’d torn a muscle. Right now, that didn’t matter. We just needed to get down to the ground safely and get home.

Flint slid me off his back and held onto me until I gained my balance. I crept to the edge of the building and gritted my teeth against the pain in my muscles. Hunkering down, I held on carefully to the edge of the roof before swinging my legs over.

“Lena . . . be careful.” Flint’s chestnut hair waved in the breeze as he stared down at me.

I forced a smile and held tightly to the gutter system. It was smooth and felt flimsy. I swallowed sharply. It didn’t feel sturdy at all, and I could

just picture it peeling away from the building with me plummeting to the ground while holding it.

"Here goes nothing." I loosened my grip on the roof's edge. The entire gutter system was holding my weight.

Flint's eyes widened with horror at my next actions. Sliding down the gutter system while using it like a fireman's pole had seemed like a good idea. That was until the ground rushed up to greet me.

"Lena!"

Swallowing a scream, I tightened my hands around the gutter and squeezed my legs while flinging my cloud off my shoulders and down below my feet. Between my tighter grip and the cushioning cloud, I slowed just enough to keep from plummeting to the ground.

I let out a loud *umph* anyway when I landed, and the force of it made my jaw snap. I winced when I bit my tongue, but I hadn't broken anything. *Mission accomplished.*

"Lena?" Flint's voice carried from above. "Are you okay?"

I gave him the thumbs-up sign since a trickle of blood filled my mouth. I had definitely bitten my tongue.

With a pounding heart, I watched as Flint swung over the ledge of the roof. Unlike the apartment building that the girl had lived in, this building was sided. It had no brick to hold onto or any kind of architecture that would help someone scale its side. All that it had was the gutter system for gripping.

Holding my breath, I watched as Flint carefully clung to the side of the gutter. It squeaked menacingly.

Oh crap.

Seeming to sense that it was about to snap, Flint loosened his grip. He slid down it at an alarming speed.

My eyes widened with terror since he wasn't slowing and would hit the ground in seconds.

Instinctively, I gathered a large energy ball and blasted it beneath his feet.

His sliding slowed, thanks to my ball, but the gutter system squeaked more loudly. When he was ten feet above the ground, Flint launched himself into the air and flipped into a backward somersault before landing on the ground. He bounced on the balls of his feet before standing to his full height.

My heart pounded. Breathing heavily, I said, “How is it that I’m still not used to how you can move? I thought for sure you were going to break a leg!”

He chuckled and walked gracefully toward me. “Thanks for slowing me down. That helped.”

His words made me smile despite the metallic taste of blood in my mouth. I scanned the road. It was dark and quiet. No cops.

“I’m not sure how we’ll get back home,” I said quietly, “but we better get moving. Who knows if the police caught a glimpse of us or not. They could be looking for us.”

Flint grabbed my hand and pulled me into a jog. “You’re right. Let’s go.”

Pain cut into my shoulder at his pull, but I took off at his side. Our feet tapped on the pavement as our pace increased.

Despite the burning that had set into my shoulder muscles, I kept up with him, only because he kept his speed to that of a normal human’s. At the next block, he pulled out his cell phone and called Jet.

“We’re two blocks south from the building.” His words were even and cool despite the fact that we were sprinting. “The police officer started climbing the fire escape. We had no choice but to go from building to building until we could find a way down.”

I grinned as air flowed steadily in and out of my lungs. I could just imagine Jet’s envious expression as he imagined Flint and me leaping across buildings. The twin hadn’t made it a secret that he would have preferred Flint’s powers over his own.

Flint was silent for a second before he said, “Yeah. That sounds good. Meet us there in a couple of minutes.”

Flint shoved his phone back into his pocket and gripped my hand more tightly. “They’ll pick us up at the next block. This way.”

He led me down the next street. A few dogs barked in yards that we passed. Since we were farther away from campus, the apartment buildings had fallen behind us, and we were in a residential neighborhood. Most of the houses were dark, but a few had lights on. I could only hope that if anyone peeked out their living-room window, they would assume we were a couple of college students going for a late-night run.

A few cars drove by at the next block, and I let out a sigh of relief when I saw a familiar vehicle waiting on the side of the road.

Flint and I slid into the back of the SUV with a grinning Raven and Jasper. “How the hell did you get away?” the twin asked.

Jet pulled away from the curb and started driving toward home. Mica turned in her seat to listen from the front.

“Have you ever seen the movie *Spider-Man*?” I smiled.

Jasper’s eyes widened. “No way! Did you seriously leap from building to building?”

I laughed when Jet mumbled something under his breath from the front.

“That would pretty much describe how we got away,” I replied.

Raven’s eyes swirled orange embers as he smirked at his brother. “Nice one, Flint.”

Flint just shrugged. “Desperate times . . .”

Jet flashed us a look in the rearview mirror as we passed under a streetlight. “Don’t rub it in.”

CHAPTER NINE

Back at our apartment, Di was still awake. Black yoga pants and a black T-shirt covered her tall frame. She waited in the living room. A single lamp illuminated the space by casting a golden glow over the ceiling. The clock in the hall had just struck two in the morning.

She crossed her arms when the six of us pushed through the front door. “I’m glad to see you all arrived safely. I tried to warn you about the cops in the vision I received, but none of you answered your phones when I called.”

Jasper shrugged off his coat. “You were a little late on the warning, Di. We were already running away when I missed your call.”

She shook her head sharply. “I should have concentrated harder, but I was distracted by this little one.” She pointedly looked at Susannah, who was seated on the couch.

Susannah’s knees were drawn to her chest, and her large, luminous blue eyes were wide. “Sorry, Di. I didn’t mean to get back so late.”

Jet groaned and kicked off his boots before strolling into the living room. His curly dark hair was disheveled from our nighttime excursion. “Please tell me that guilty look isn’t from ruining my car.”

Raven’s eyes swirled brighter. “I have a feeling he’s not going to like the news,” he said under his breath to me.

Flint chuckled. I knew he’d heard Raven too.

Susannah shook her head at Jet, her long hair swaying around her shoulders. “It’s still in one piece . . . mostly.”

Jet collapsed onto the couch across from her. “Seriously? Okay, spill it. What did you do?”

Susannah wrung her hands and looked at the seven of us. Di stood near the corner of the room with her arms crossed. From the looks of it, Susannah had already received an earful from Di.

“I may have . . . um, hit a tree.”

“But you’re okay?” I peeled off my coat and sat on the chair by the couch. My shoulders still hurt, but after I rolled them a few times, they felt

a little better. I no longer thought I'd torn muscles, but I'd probably be sore the next day.

I tucked my hands under my thighs to warm them up. Our apartment was cool. Someone had left a window cracked open. Flint came up behind me. I felt his presence as Mica, Jasper, and Raven joined us too.

"I'm fine. But the back door of your car . . ." Susannah eyed Jet. "May have a dent in it."

Jet dropped his head into his hands and moaned. "Ah, man!"

Jasper laughed. "Glad you made it back in one piece, Suze."

Mica plopped down beside Susannah. "No kidding." She turned to face her. "So why didn't you come back earlier? We were hoping you could tell us what you saw."

Susannah ducked her head again. "I knew Jet would be mad at me."

Mica raised her eyebrows. "So you were avoiding us?"

Jasper clapped his brother on the back. "Don't worry about it, Susannah. He'll get over it. Serves him right for loaning you his new car when you're still learning how to drive."

Jet glared at his brother.

"I'll pay to have it fixed." Susannah peeked up at Jet.

Raven gave her a sympathetic look. "Your trust fund can certainly handle it since you never use it."

"Yeah, yeah. Don't worry about the money." Jet lifted his head. "Is it at least drivable?"

Susannah nodded vigorously. "Oh, yes. Definitely. It's just a small dent. Really, I swear."

Turning away from Jet, Susannah addressed the rest of us. "So what did you all find? I saw you all around her apartment building earlier in the evening when I was circling it. It didn't seem to be very exciting. None of you moved, and I never saw anyone else lurking around there."

I summed up the evening for her as succinctly as possible.

Susannah's eyes widened. "I left before all of that began. So with you on his back, Flint really jumped from building to building to get away from the police?"

"Yep." I eyed my boyfriend. "It was pretty exhilarating."

Excitement danced in Susannah's eyes. "Sounds like fun."

Heavy footsteps sounded from the back of our apartment. Luke appeared at the room's edge, standing in the dim hallway. He was bare

chested and wore only a pair of shorts. Shoulders three feet wide brushed against the walls as taut muscles rippled in his abdomen. “How were your adventures?” He yawned loudly and scratched his belly.

Di gave him a heated look. “You could have been more help, you know.”

Luke shuffled into the living room and sat at Susannah’s free side. The cushion sank so deeply in his direction when he plopped down that Susannah fell into him.

He merely pushed her upright before raising his eyebrows at the rest of us. “Had a little run-in with the cops, huh?”

Di crossed her arms. “I take it you knew earlier than I did?”

“Uh-huh.” Luke tapped his head. “Saw it all up here a few hours ago.”

Di muttered a sound of disgust and rolled her eyes. Luke just laughed, the sound rumbling deep in his chest.

I wasn’t surprised that Luke knew our evening had gone sour. He, Edgar, and Susannah all had extra abilities that the original eight of us didn’t. Since the three of them had been drugged more heavily than we had, and survived it, they were truly superhumans. That also wasn’t the first glimpse we’d had of Luke’s psychic abilities. When we first met him, he’d intrinsically known what all of us were capable of before we’d told him.

“A heads-up would have been nice.” Flint came around the chair from behind me and hunkered down at my side. He eyed the werewolf. “Or did you not see it in time?”

Luke shrugged. “Yeah, I saw it an hour or so before it happened, but I also knew none of you were going to get arrested, so I didn’t worry too much about it.”

Mica and I both laughed simultaneously at his nonchalant attitude.

“Thanks for your concern, as always, dearest Luke,” Mica said sweetly after she wiped the tears from her eyes.

Luke’s caramel-colored eyes twinkled before his expression turned serious. “I have bigger things to worry about right now. My mate isn’t sleeping well, and our little pup is really causing her worry. My energies seemed better spent in that department tonight.”

His words wiped the smile from my face. Frowning, I replied, “I couldn’t agree more.”

Jet still grumbled. “You could have at least warned me that Susannah was going to wreck my car.”

Luke grinned, revealing a mouth full of straight white teeth. “Now where would the fun be in that?”

Jasper laughed before stretching and yawning loudly. “So what are we going to do now?”

I straightened in my seat. “Flint found her name—A. Jonas. We’ll need you hackers to find her class schedule in the school system database. Tomorrow, we can start following her. With any luck, the dark-clouded man will show up on his own, and Susannah can watch from above and tell us where he lives, or Luke can track him with his weird psychic thing, or if Amber gets close enough, she can use her scenting ability to track him. Either way, we’ll find where he lives. Then we can start watching him.”

Jasper rubbed his hands together in anticipation and eyed the clock. Despite the time, he suddenly looked wide-awake. “Come to think of it, I’m not that tired. Flint, where’s your laptop?”

~ ~ ~

The next morning, we set out early despite only getting a few hours of sleep. Scents of coffee hung in the air. All of us had chugged a few cups before getting dressed.

Flint and Jasper had been able to uncover the woman’s class schedule and information the night before.

Her name was Abigail Jonas, and she was a junior at the university. She was twenty-one years old, originally from Phoenix, and had been attending college in Colorado for the past three years.

After hacking into the university’s database, Flint and Jasper had then tackled the DMV’s. According to their records, Abigail was of medium build, weighed around one hundred thirty pounds, and had run a stoplight when she was nineteen. Beyond that, she didn’t have a very interesting record.

Our plan that morning was to drive Susannah to a remote location so she could transform before taking to the skies. From there, seven of us would venture to campus while two would return to Abigail’s apartment.

Since we’d made so much progress with finding information, our original plan to continue watching her had changed. Now that we knew her schedule and exactly who she was, everyone was helping—except Amber.

Amber’s cold had grown worse, which meant her sense of smell was compromised. Everyone agreed she should stay back to get better.

“Does everybody have Abigail’s schedule in their phone?” Di slipped into her black two-inch-heeled boots. After that, she pulled on a black fleece jacket before zipping it up. The day was cool. According to the weatherman, the temperature would only reach the low sixties.

Mica nodded before pulling up the hoodie on her university sweatshirt. The black-and-gold clothing practically swallowed her. I had a feeling it was Jasper’s sweatshirt.

“Yeah, we’ve got everything we need, Di. Don’t sweat it.” Mica winked.

Di eyed her coolly.

“Are you ready to go, Jet?” Raven asked. He and Jet had volunteered to be the two who hung around Abigail’s building in case the dark-clouded man tried to break in while she was in class.

The twin nodded and pulled on a sweatshirt. “Let’s rock and roll.”

Luke slipped his massive feet into a pair of outdoor-style loafers. In addition to that, he wore jeans and a T-shirt.

Flint was in similar attire. Since the two of them had such high metabolisms, they rarely grew cold. The two of them often wore shorts in the dead of winter.

Jet opened the door with a flourish. “Shall we?” He made a grand gesture with his arm toward the hallway.

Mica laughed as she, Jet, and Raven set out. Jasper followed and their voices carried from the hallway.

A cough sounded from the back bedroom. Poor Amber was buried under the guest bed’s thick comforter.

I cast a glance in her direction before sliding on my sneakers. *Too bad Jacinda’s not here. She’d happily stay back and take care of her.*

Thinking of my sister made me frown. According to Luke, Jacinda had experienced another sleepless night. Apparently, the baby had been kicking vigorously until the wee hours of the morning, which had been enough movement that Jacinda feared something was really wrong. She’d woken Father to do an ultrasound. Luckily, the ultrasound revealed only a very awake fetus and nothing more.

I could only hope that everything would turn out okay with the baby. Though I’d tried to remain optimistic, worry was starting to creep into my

gut. Jacinda was convinced that something was wrong.

"Lena? You coming?" Flint stood in the doorway. From the sound of it, everyone else was already walking down the stairs to the parking lot.

"Yeah. Coming."

We didn't waste time getting to campus. After dropping Susannah off, the seven of us hightailed it back into town in two vehicles. Di drove one, and Flint the other.

Cool springtime wind whipped through the trees when we stepped onto the sidewalk on campus. A buzz emitted from my pocket. I knew who it was before I pulled my phone out.

Sure enough, a text from Grace appeared.

Where are you?

I grimaced. That sick feeling in my stomach returned.

"What is it?" Flint asked.

As Jasper, Mica, Flint, Di, Edgar, Luke, and I stood on the sidewalk, Di surveyed our surroundings. I tilted my phone's screen toward Flint so he could read the text. "It's Grace."

"You didn't tell her you were skipping class today?"

"I forgot to."

I hastily typed in a reply while knowing I'd get an earful from her later. She hated when I ditched class. In a way, she was good for my GPA. I usually never skipped lectures because of her.

Decided to sleep in so not going to make it. See you later?

When a response didn't immediately arrive, I shoved my phone back in my pocket. The guilty feeling in my stomach grew.

"All right, let's split up." Di's long olive-toned fingers brushed her hair behind her ears. "Her first class is calculus. A few of us should go to that building to keep an eye on her, and the rest of us can stay outside. Try not to draw attention to yourselves."

Mica's eyebrows rose as she looked Luke up and down. "You do realize who we're with, right?"

Luke grinned, his golden eyes flickering. "What are you saying? That I draw attention or something?"

Mica and I both laughed. Luke's immense bulk *always* drew attention.

Di raised her voice. “As I was saying . . . let’s split up and try *not* to draw attention to ourselves.”

We were already getting looks from students walking by us. Since we were standing in the middle of the sidewalk, blocking traffic, that wasn’t surprising.

“Should we split up in groups of twos or go off alone?” I asked.

Edgar shrugged. “It’s the middle of the day. Probably just fine to spli’ up. We’ve all got our phones. If we need to get in contact with each other, we can.”

Flint glowered, and I could tell he was about to open his mouth, but Jasper said, “We won’t be far from one another. And if we all split up, we may be able to see more.”

Di nodded briskly. “All right. That sounds like a good plan. You’re all familiar with his description. Stocky build, with dark hair. If any of you sees a man meeting that description following Abigail, let the rest of us know immediately. If Luke gets close enough, he may be able to catch his scent. Edgar?” Di turned her gaze to the bald-headed man. “Are you willing to use your extra abilities to help track him down?”

Edgar grimaced and shoved his hands awkwardly into his pockets. Of the three lost children we’d rescued from O’Brien, Edgar was the most normal in the sense that he hated using his extra abilities. I’d never once seen him in his otter form, and I’d never known him to willingly use any of his powers—whatever those powers were.

“Uh . . .” He wouldn’t meet Di’s gaze.

For a long time, I hadn’t known why Edgar shied away from his powers, but then one night he’d confessed that he hated using them. It reminded him of what had been done to him as a child, and it also reminded him that he would never be a normal human.

Di crossed her arms and tapped her fingers on her forearm. “Well?”

Edgar pulled a hand from his pocket to rub his bald head. “If I have to, I will, but as you know, I prefer not to.”

I placed my hand on his arm and squeezed. “Hopefully, Luke can do the tracking aspect for us. You just keep an eye out.”

He gave me a grateful smile. “Deal.”

“Fine. We’ll leave the tracking to Luke.” Di turned my way. “Lena, it’s imperative you snap a picture of this man if you see him. You are the only

one who will know it's him even though we have a vague description of him. None of us can sense his cloud."

I jutted my chin out. "I will."

Everyone took off in opposite directions, but before I could, Flint leaned closer and pressed his lips against my temple. "Promise me you're not going to do anything stupid." Worry rolled off him like a storm rolling in from the sea.

"I promise to find you before I go chasing after him again, if that's what you mean." I squeezed his hand.

His worry remained. "I'll have Luke track you if you take off on your own again."

A hint of annoyance filled me even though I knew Flint's overprotectiveness stemmed from love. "Why am I not surprised?"

He gave my hand a tight squeeze and growled, "Be good."

My cheeks flushed as I balled my fists.

When I opened my mouth to give him a tart reply, he said, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like that. That was condescending. It's just . . ." He raked a hand through his hair. "Shit. Just . . . don't go anywhere without me. Okay?"

I sighed heavily but managed a curt nod.

Flint stuffed his hands into his jean pockets and strolled away down the sidewalk. Despite our being on the brink of another argument, I paused to admire the view.

In a plain T-shirt, Flint's shoulders stretched and moved with his movements, and his long legs and firm backside looked nice in his jeans.

Of course, as usual, I wasn't the only one admiring the view. Several university students, mostly female, although there was a male as well, turned to watch Flint as he walked past them.

Also, as was the norm, Flint ignored them. I had no idea if he was conscious of the attention he drew, but he never paid it any mind. Even after all of these years, he still only had eyes for me.

Damn my overprotective, incredibly sexy, drives-me-crazy-at-times-but-I-still-can't-live-without-him boyfriend! Why did he have to be so perfect in so many other ways? Even though he was driving me crazy at the moment with his overbearingness, my pulse still quickened at the sight of his strong physique.

Okay, Lena. Look away and get to work.

After all, I needed to concentrate. My job was the most important one this morning. Until I correctly identified the dark-clouded man, Luke would not be able to track him.

Once Flint disappeared from view, I settled on a bench just outside Abigail's building. The campus grounds grew less busy by the second. The first class of the day had started, but a few wayward students were still racing to their buildings. All their clouds were white, ivory, or light gray.

Mica and Jasper opened the door to go inside Abigail's building. They planned to join her class and sit in the back. At least we knew what she looked like, thanks to her driver's license photo and her university picture. Only the dark-clouded man remained a mystery.

A few minutes passed before another buzz sounded in my pocket. I pulled out my phone to see a text from Flint.

You're looking rather sexy sitting on that bench.

My head whipped around as I groaned. When I didn't see Flint, I typed in a reply. ***You're supposed to be watching for him, not me!***

What can I say? My priorities are different.

I huffed and turned away so I could watch the remaining students mingling outside. Their clouds floated around them, and clouds bubbled above all of the plants too. Seeing clouds around every living life force was now so easy for me. That hadn't always been the case. Two years ago, I'd struggled to see any clouds around plants and animals.

When I spotted Flint's orange, blue, and pale green cloud, I wasn't surprised to see that he hadn't gone far. He stood behind a large tree about a hundred yards away. His shoulders and watchful eyes peered out from the side of the trunk.

Of course he didn't go far. He may pretend to be giving me space to claim my independence, but he's really not. He's still spying on me.

Even though I could kiss him since he loved me so much, I also wanted to throttle him.

I was about to text again and remind him why we were here, when a pulsing feeling washed over me. My eyes widened. All thoughts of texting Flint vanished.

He was near.

The sensation was the same icky and oily feeling I'd felt from his cloud last evening outside the Thai restaurant. Keeping my vision in its altered eyesight, I scanned the buildings and grounds for him.

I didn't see him.

I stood from the bench and tried to act casual as I strolled toward where I felt the cloud. After slipping on a pair of sunglasses, I hastily rang Di's cell phone.

"Keep your eyes peeled," I said. "He's close."

"Do you see him?"

"No. But I feel him."

"I'll let the others know. Keep looking."

I pocketed my phone. In the distance, Flint straightened from his position behind the tree. From the tense way he stood, I guessed he knew something was up.

My gaze shifted left and right as I carried on down the sidewalk. Wind whistled through the trees as the sun continued to climb. But no matter which way I looked, I couldn't see him. But I *felt* him.

So what does that mean?

He had to be hiding somewhere if I couldn't see his cloud. If he were out in the open, his dark pulsing aura would appear readily even if it was in the distance.

A queasy feeling in my stomach grew. An image of confronting him last night on the sidewalk flashed through my mind. He'd seen my face. He knew what I looked like.

But I still didn't know who he was.

I circled the building twice. The feeling of his cloud stayed, but it was always behind me, and it felt higher up. *Is he watching from one of the buildings?* Three times I twirled around, expecting to see him a few feet away, only to encounter an empty sidewalk. *So what does that mean? That his energy is growing because he's planning something?*

My stomach churned. Another buzz sounded from my pocket. Di was calling again.

She didn't bother with a greeting. "Any sign of him?"

"No, not yet."

I shoved my phone into my pocket and retreated to the bench at the front of the building. Another twenty minutes of class time loomed. *He must be out here waiting somewhere for her.*

I reasoned that his strong energy again indicated an imminent attack. Although, right now, it was the strongest it had ever been. *He's definitely planning something!*

The oily feeling repeatedly coated my skin. I paused and closed my eyes. I let the power from the dark-clouded man's aura flow over me. After a few minutes, I frowned.

The strange thing was that something about the energy felt . . . familiar—almost as if it was a cloud I'd encountered before. *But that doesn't make sense. Nobody I know here has a black cloud.*

Twenty minutes later, students poured out of the doors from all the campus buildings. Class had ended.

I stood from my bench when Mica and Jasper appeared at the top of the stairs from the building they'd been in. A dark-haired girl hopped down the steps in front of them. Abigail chatted with a friend who walked at her side. They innocently stepped onto the sidewalk and began walking toward their next class.

I eyed Mica and Jasper but stayed put since I still felt the dark-clouded man in this area. After pulling out my phone, I typed in a quick text to Jasper.

Follow Abigail. I'm going to stay here. It's best if we split up more so he doesn't see us all together.

Jasper pulled his phone from his pocket and showed it to Mica. The two of them took off down the sidewalk hand in hand. They never glanced my way.

After sending text messages to the rest of my family, I concentrated more on the evil energy still flowing through the springtime air.

How weird. He doesn't seem to be following her.

I'd felt certain that once Abigail left the building, I would feel the energy shift and grow fainter as he took off after her, but that didn't happen.

It stayed the same.

When foot traffic on the campus began to die down, I knew the next class had probably started.

I stood from the bench and began walking in the direction Abigail had gone. At first, the evil energy stayed behind me, but then it moved with me.

Whipping around, I scanned the grounds for him again. Still no sign of him. *Is he on the freakin' roof? What the hell?*

With my heart pounding in my chest, I once again set out in the direction of Abigail's next class. And with each step I took, a dawning realization filled me that something very unusual was happening.

The dark-clouded man was now following *me*.

~ ~ ~

We kept up our surveillance for the rest of the day. Every time Abigail left a class, went to grab a bite to eat, or met up with friends, we trailed in her wake. But as each hour passed, the fact that my initial suspicion was correct became more apparent. For whatever reason, the dark-clouded man's energy no longer seemed focused on Abigail. Wherever I went, I felt him follow. The most frustrating aspect, however, was that I never saw him.

I knew that meant he had a thorough working knowledge of the campus grounds. Either he was moving from building to building and knew which doors to use, or he knew which outdoor objects were big enough to hide behind. And every time I moved casually in his direction, I always felt his energy retreat. Whatever he was doing to remain elusive only made my skin crawl more. The creep was a grade-A professional stalker. I shuddered at the thought.

Toward the end of the day, I debated how I wanted to approach the subject with my family. It was possible the dark-clouded man realized I was looking for him. It would explain why his attention had moved from Abigail to me.

I already dreaded that conversation with Flint. It wouldn't be pretty, and I was fairly certain he'd throw me over his shoulder and haul me away to lock me inside our bedroom. He'd then probably stand watch outside, caveman-style.

The air had cooled when I found a spot on the lawn to sit and wait. The last class of the day had begun, so Abigail would most likely be heading home soon.

My muscles tensed, jarring my sore shoulders, as the energy in the air shifted again. His cloud grew stronger. I opened my eyes and whipped my head around.

I caught sight of a black cloud just as it disappeared behind a building. My breath stopped.

Go! This may be your only chance!

I pushed up and sprinted in his direction.

A part of me knew I should stop and pull out my phone. Luke or Di might have been on this side of the campus. They might have been able to see him before I could, and Flint would kill me for doing this again, but if he disappeared. . .

I wasn't willing to take that chance.

Cool springtime air washed over my cheeks as I bolted. I reached the building in seconds and careened around the corner.

The black cloud disappeared around the building's back corner thirty yards away.

No!

My footsteps pounded into the lawn as I ran full-speed to the back of the building. I came around the corner so quickly that I didn't register the rising energy until it was too late. The evil power swelled outward from its occupant to wrap all around me.

I ran right into him.

Large meaty hands reached up to grip my shoulders. I shrieked just as a sly grin spread across the man's face.

My eyes widened as I took in the stocky build, dark hair, and familiar leer.

I couldn't believe who I was looking at. It was someone I had hoped to never see again.

Aaron, the psychopathic cowboy who had attacked me on Pete and Val's ranch two years ago, stared down at me as he held onto my upper body.

"Lena. We meet again."

CHAPTER TEN

I had to be dreaming. This couldn't be happening. *Aaron? Aaron is the dark-clouded man? But what are the chances?*

His grip on me tightened, which forced me to snap back to the present.

"No!" I struggled against his grasp. "Let me go!"

Another energy pulsed into my back, a familiar one that always brought me comfort and that irresistible feeling of safety.

"You heard her. Let her go." Flint's voice was cold. It chilled me to my core.

"Why am I not surprised to see you here?" Aaron finally released me, and his arms fell to his sides.

I hastily stepped back. I was panting so heavily that I felt light-headed. Everything in me told me to blast Aaron with an energy ball, but I couldn't do that in public. It was too risky.

"I could tell you always had a thing for her even if you were too much of a pussy to show it." Aaron laughed.

Flint advanced, but I held out a hand to stop him. As of right then, we had nothing on Aaron. All that I had was the memory of him from over two years ago when he'd attacked me in the mountains on Pete and Val's ranch. After that attack, he had disappeared. We had never seen him again . . . until now.

"What are you doing here?" I somehow managed the words despite the rage and fear rolling in my belly like a volcano that wanted to explode. This man had terrified me so much when I'd met him, but I hadn't known then what I could do. I was stronger now—most definitely stronger than him. The thought of bringing him to his knees with a huge energy ball brought a satisfying feeling into the pit of my stomach.

"What do you mean, what am I doing here? I live here."

At my side, Flint was still seething, but at least he had stopped advancing. If Flint attacked Aaron out here in broad daylight, Flint would be charged, not Aaron. Luckily, Flint seemed to realize that too.

“So you’re a student?” I asked.

He cocked his head. That arrogant gleam in his eyes hadn’t faded. “Maybe I am. Maybe I’m not.”

More energy filled the air, and I knew another one of my family members had arrived. The anger in Di’s cloud grew the closer she got.

“Aaron.” Di said his name as a statement, not a question. “It’s you.”

Aaron snickered. “So it seems.”

Inwardly, the conflicting emotions of fear and anger still warred for dominance. One part of me wanted to wipe that smirk off Aaron’s face, but the other part of me wanted to run and hide. I’d encountered only a few clouds like his in my lifetime, and now, the fact that it had always been *him* following Abigail seemed quite obvious.

So does that mean Aaron is the serial attacker? Is he the one behind all of the assaults on campus?

I knew without a doubt the man could be him. Considering he had tried to attack me, I wouldn’t have been surprised if he had continued doing that after he escaped the ranch.

“Well, as nice as this little reunion is, I’m afraid I need to get going.” Aaron took a step back before leveling me with a meaningful gaze. “It was a pleasure to see you again, Lena.”

Flint took an abrupt step forward.

My hand shot out to grip his forearm.

“Not here,” I said.

Already, a few students were glancing our way.

Aaron laughed. “Still the little puppy who does whatever he’s told.” His taunt only made the energy around Flint grow, but I guessed that was what Aaron wanted. He knew that out here in broad daylight, we wouldn’t do anything, so he was having some fun with us in the process.

“We’ll be seeing you around,” I said and pulled Flint back as Aaron gave me a leering smile.

“I look forward to it.” He sauntered away. From his casual movements and the cocky sway in his hips, I knew he didn’t think anything would ever come of this, but he was wrong.

Now that I’d found him, there was no way I was letting him get away.

~ ~ ~

“You’re kidding me! Aaron was here? The same cowboy who attacked you on Pete and Val’s ranch?” Mica’s questions came out in a screech.

“Yeah. It was him.” My arms were crossed over my chest as the wind whipped my long dark-red hair around my shoulders. “I should have known. It was only this morning that I realized something about his cloud felt familiar. Now I know why. I’ve encountered it before.”

The six of us stood outside the building where Abigail had her last class.

Aaron had left only twenty minutes ago. Luke set out after him so that, at the very least, we could learn where Aaron lived. Since Aaron had no idea who Luke was, he wouldn’t recognize him, and the werewolf could be very subtle. If Luke made up his mind to stalk someone, they’d have no idea he was there.

A steady stream of anxiety strummed along my nerves. The more I thought about it, the more I was sure Aaron was the serial attacker. If we didn’t stop him now, he would continue attacking women for years to come.

“I should have taken him down when I had the chance.” Flint’s energy still poured out of him like radiation from the sun. None of us were happy that Aaron had walked away, but Di had agreed with me that now wasn’t the time to do anything about it.

The only good thing was that we’d accomplished what we had set out to do this morning. We now knew *who* the attacker was, but none of us had ever suspected that he would be someone from our past.

“That sick bastard.” A scowl filled Jasper’s face. “He needs to be stopped.”

“He will be. Now, it’s just a matter of deciding how. How’s Abigail doing?” I asked Jasper and Mica.

Jasper shrugged. “She’s fine. She has had absolutely no idea that all of us have been following her today. The girl is truly oblivious.”

“I overheard her and her friends talking about going to the library,” Mica added. “Sounds like she’ll be hanging out with friends all evening. I don’t think we need to worry about Aaron attacking her anytime in the next few hours. So should we go home and regroup?”

Hearing that reminded me that I still hadn’t heard from Grace. *She’s definitely mad at me.* That was one more stress to add to my plate.

We returned to our apartment after sending Raven and Jet a text telling them to meet us there. We still had no word from Luke, but considering his

immense strength, tracking abilities, expedited healing, and other subtle gifts that I still didn't fully understand, none of us were worried about him. He was truly the best choice to keep on Aaron's tail.

Susannah showed up soon after we arrived at our apartment, as if she knew we needed her to return.

With all of us crammed in our living room, creating so many tense emotions and so much rage-filled energy, a headache was forming in the back of my mind. Everyone in our original family of eight remembered Aaron, and considering what permeated the air right now, I wasn't the only one feeling restless and charged. The pure power radiating off of Flint was enough to cause me a significant migraine.

I welled up my energy, pulled my cloud from around my shoulders, and formed a protective bubble. Right now, I needed to think clearly.

"So what do we do?" Amber sat on the couch, wrapped in a thick fleece blanket. Her nose was red and puffy, and pink skin rimmed her eyes. Balling a tissue to her nose, she sneezed before blowing her nose again.

Jet gave her a look. "No offense, but you should probably go back to bed. I certainly don't want to catch whatever you have."

Amber shrugged miserably. "This is horrible timing. I wish I was well enough to help you out."

Di shook her head. "There are more than enough of us to deal with Aaron. You just take care of yourself until you're feeling better."

"I'll make you some soup, love." Edgar pushed away from the wall. "Go on to bed, and I'll bring it to you." From the relieved expression on Edgar's face, he clearly relished the excuse to leave our current conversation. Once again, he wanted nothing to do with anything that involved using powers.

Amber gave him a grateful smile. "Thank you. Chicken noodle would be great." She stood and toddled off to the back bedroom.

"I wondered if something strange was going on." Susannah's soft voice filled the room.

"What do you mean?" Mica asked. She held a huge bowl of ice cream that she'd just helped herself to in the kitchen. She spooned another bite into her mouth.

Susannah's head cocked at unnatural speed, a trait that she didn't seem aware of most of the time. "When I was circling above, I saw that man who must be Aaron. He was in the area the entire time, but he was on rooftops

and going from building to building. He seemed to be following Lena. It was almost like he was stalking . . . *her.”*

Susannah’s words confirmed what I’d suspected all day. My stomach dropped.

The energy off Flint exploded. “If that bastard tries to come near her again, I’ll—”

“Flint.” Di’s sharp voice cut him off. “We’ll keep Lena safe. If anything, we need to figure out a way to catch him in the act so the police can arrest him. Until then, our hands are tied. Even if we go to the police and tell them our concerns, it would simply be our word against his.”

“Even though he attacked Lena a couple of years ago?” Raven frowned heavily. He still wore his brown contacts. The fiery orange that normally swirled in his irises was hidden. “Surely, that counts for something.”

Di shrugged. “It may. But even if the police arrest him based off of that accusation, it’s still her word against his.”

“We should find where he lives.” Jasper crossed his arms and leaned against the wall. “We can watch him more closely, then we can report him to the police when he goes in to attack.”

“Good idea.” Di eyed all of us. “Does anyone know his last name?”

Mica grumbled. “No. Since we only introduced ourselves with first names on the ranch, I don’t think we ever knew his last name.”

Jasper shut the laptop. “So much for finding where he lives. Without a last name, that’s nearly impossible.”

Flint began pacing. His movements quickly turned into a blur. I knew he was really struggling. He’d been incredibly angry after Aaron attacked me. If the cowboy had turned up after that attack, I had no doubt Flint would have ripped him to shreds. And now that Aaron had resurfaced, it was taking every ounce of Flint’s control to not finish what should have ended long ago.

The door to our apartment opened, and a rush of air flowed in from the hallway. Luke stepped inside.

My eyes widened. “Luke! What are you doing here? I thought you were following Aaron!”

Luke kicked off his shoes and raked a hand through his hair. “I was, but he went back home. Or at least I’m assuming it’s his home since he had

a key to it. I stayed outside for a while and watched him through his back window, but he wasn't doing anything other than packing."

"Packing?" My initial excitement that Luke knew where Aaron lived dimmed.

After sauntering over to the couch, Luke dropped onto it, which bounced Mica in her seat, causing her spoon to rattle in the bowl. She glowered at him.

"Yeah. He seemed kind of in a hurry, like he plans to go somewhere."

My insides stilled. "Is he planning to run again?"

Luke cocked his head. "Run again?"

I groaned. Of course, Luke had no idea that Aaron had run the first time after he attacked me. *Is that what he's always done? Does he stay in an area, attacking women until there's a chance of him getting caught? And then he flees?*

That would explain why he'd left so suddenly from the ranch all those years ago. None of us had known he would show up in a different city and continue assaulting women. Anger burned in my gut, making my hands clench into fists. *He needs to be stopped!*

Jasper sat his laptop down. "So you know his address, Luke?"

Luke nodded and rattled it off.

Jasper jotted it down.

"Nice job, Luke. So we need to consider following him from now on." Di's brow drew together in concentration. "Considering Abigail is spending the evening with friends, she should be safe for at least a few more hours. Should we go back to her apartment tonight to keep watch?"

"But Aaron is packing right now!" I exclaimed. "Who's to say he's not already leaving town?"

Di crossed her arms and tapped a finger against her biceps. "There is that possibility, but then we know Abigail is safe and he won't be attacking anybody else here."

"Until he attacks somebody else at a different location," I countered.

Di nodded shrewdly. "That's true. There's a possibility he'll just go somewhere else and assault a different woman, but what do you suggest we do? Track him throughout the country and hope that we eventually catch him in the act? It doesn't seem very feasible, Lena. I know you want to see Aaron behind bars, especially after what he did to you, but we also need to stay levelheaded. The way you've been acting today has already shown him

that you have an uncanny ability to sense when he's near. You don't think he recognized all those times you whirled around to face him? Remember what father said: we *must* keep our abilities a secret. As much as I want Aaron behind bars, I'm not willing to risk our powers being exposed."

She turned to the rest of the group. "I one hundred percent believe we should continue keeping an eye on Aaron and Abigail, but if Aaron leaves town, we can't continue following him if we need to keep using our powers to locate him. It would be too risky."

Raven nodded. "You have a point, Di." His gaze then shifted to me and softened. "But we'll try to catch him before that happens. Okay, Lena?"

I bit my lip. I knew the safest course of action was to do what Di said. We couldn't let our powers be exposed. That would open an entirely new can of worms.

But if Aaron left town, he'd continue assaulting women for who knew how long—probably for the rest of his life.

And even if he *did* stay in town, we had no guarantee of catching him. To do that, we would need to catch Aaron in the act and then call the police. But I also knew Aaron was tricky. Following him hadn't been easy. Just last night I'd been following him after the restaurant and had lost him. *Who's to say that won't happen again?*

And worse, if Aaron *did* disappear from the area only to begin attacking women in a different city . . .

My heart pounded. *I can't let that happen!*

The realization came to me that if I truly wanted to stop Aaron, I needed to do it myself.

And I needed to do it soon.

~ ~ ~

Another hour passed while everyone hashed out a schedule to follow Aaron. The sun was close to setting, and my stomach growled, reminding me I hadn't eaten in hours.

I made sure to keep my thoughts to myself as I formulated my own agenda. If Flint or Di caught wind of what I wanted to do, they'd tie me up and stow me away in a back bedroom—especially Flint. If he knew I intended to go after Aaron by myself tonight, he'd go into a rage.

But I needed to. After all, Aaron had been following *me* this morning, not Abigail. He wanted me.

An image of Aaron watching me from across the sidewalk yesterday filled my mind once again. *No wonder he stared at me for so long. He obviously recognized me—the girl who got away.*

He probably wanted to finish what he had started all those years ago. I shuddered at the memory.

For weeks while I worked on Pete and Val's ranch, I had felt the cowboy's hungry gaze follow me every time we met. He'd wanted me—for what reason I didn't know—and I'd known that from the beginning. But . . . he'd never been able to act on it. Not really. I'd foiled his plans to assault me after escaping on a horse.

The wheels turned in my mind while everyone else discussed various options of what to do next. Since the discussion grew heated, nobody seemed to notice my quietness.

He still wants me, so if I give him the opportunity to trap me, I can turn the tables. I'm stronger than him, but he doesn't know that. If I can lure him somewhere, let him believe that he'll be able to attack me, even let him rough me up a little bit, I can call the police and they can catch him in the act.

The plan was risky, but I had an advantage. I knew I was strong enough to stop him whenever I wanted to. One blast from my energy ball, and he'd be knocked out cold.

Flint's heightened cloud continued to fill the room. His pacing hadn't lessened. As much as it killed me to keep this from him, I knew he would bar the door and windows if he found out. And I had promised Flint I wouldn't go after Aaron alone again.

But if I don't go alone . . .

There was someone in this group who I bet would join me.

I glanced at Mica just as she took another big bite of ice cream. She was on her second bowl. "Mica? Do you want to go with me to buy some groceries?"

At the mention of buying more food, she perked up. "Groceries? Sure!" She polished off the last bite, licked her spoon, and set her empty bowl down.

The discussion in the room paused.

“Groceries?” Jet raised an eyebrow. “You’re thinking about *groceries* right now?”

Mica put her hands on her hips. “Regardless of this douchebag from our past, we still need to eat. Jeez, Jet . . .”

I suppressed a smile and stood. I could always count on Mica to think with her stomach first. After retrieving my shoes and jacket from the front door, I slipped them on. Nervous energy filled me. It was possible that within the hour I would be alone with Aaron, and he could be trying to do who knew what.

But before I could leave, Flint appeared in front of me. “Where are you going?” The worry pouring from him made my gut tighten.

“We’re just going to pick up a few things for supper. If you haven’t noticed, we’re running a bit low on food.” I kept my gaze averted since he always seemed to know when I was hiding something.

He tilted my face to his, forcing me to meet his gaze. With narrowed eyes, he said, “Jet’s right. Are you really telling me you’re worried about having enough food in the house right now? We just ran into the psycho who tried to attack you two years ago. I think it’s more important to figure out a way to stop him. Don’t you?”

Mica grabbed her jacket and rolled her eyes. “You too, Flint? Seriously, what do you guys have against talking *and* eating?”

Flint ignored her.

I laid a hand on Flint’s forearm. His muscles bunched beneath my grip. “We’ll stop him. But it’s not happening tonight.” I leaned up on my tiptoes and kissed him on the lips before he could catch the deception in my intentions.

His arms wrapped around my waist and pulled me close. Beneath the angry raw energy radiating from him, at its base I felt his true emotion—fear.

I pulled back and continued getting ready to go. “We’ll be fine. I’m not going alone. Mica’s with me.”

Flint took a deep breath and raked a hand through his hair. “I know, babe. But when I saw him today . . .” His eyes clouded over. “You don’t understand what I went through when I saw you slumped against that tree in the mountains all of those months ago. I went to hell and back in a split second. I thought I’d lost you.” Pain rimmed his eyes. “And now that he’s

back and showing interest in you again . . .” A muscle began ticking in his jaw. “I’ll kill him if he lays another finger on you.”

The chill in his words made goose bumps rise along my forearms, and guilt in me rose higher. He trusted me to be honest with him. *But I can’t let Aaron get away. Flint’s going to be so mad when he finds out, but I have to do this.*

“It won’t come to that. We’ll find a way to stop him without anybody getting hurt.” I swallowed. The comforting words tasted bitter on my tongue, especially when Flint nodded acceptingly.

“You’re right. We’ll catch him together.”

Mica opened the front door and tapped her foot. “So . . . are we going?”

I gave Flint one last squeeze before saying, “Yeah. Let’s go.”

Leaving Flint at the apartment building was hard. I was purposefully deceiving him, but only because I knew he would stop me if he knew my plans. *But I can’t let Aaron get away! I just can’t!*

“So what are we going to buy?” Mica asked cheerfully as we trailed down the hallway to the stairwell.

I pushed open the door to the stairs and waited for it to close behind us before I responded. “About that . . . I actually have something to discuss with you that doesn’t involve grocery shopping.” Our feet thudded on the carpeted stairs as we jogged down them.

We pushed open the outer door to the parking lot. Warm evening air rolled on the breeze. A few birds chirped from the tall trees lining the back of the lot.

Mica raised her eyebrows. “Why do I get a feeling that what you’re going to tell me isn’t anything good?” She grinned.

I laughed. Without a doubt, I knew I’d picked the best partner in crime.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Mica wasn't entirely convinced that my plan was a good one, but she *did* promise to not run back to our family to tell them . . . within reason.

"If I actually think harm is going to come to you, sorry, Lena, but I'm going to spill the beans. I can't let you get hurt." She drove through the residential streets toward Aaron's home.

I quickly nodded as we turned down the street that Aaron lived on. "I totally understand that, but honestly, Mica, you know what I'm capable of. Aaron won't get the upper hand."

"I know, which is the only reason I'm willing to help you." An excited gleam entered her eyes when she pulled up to the curb. "I'd love to be there to watch when you unleash your power on him."

I smiled and unclicked my seat belt. "That would be pretty cool, but I have to do this alone. If you're with me, he'll probably be less likely to attack."

Mica sighed wistfully as I opened my door. "I know, but I can still daydream about it."

"So you remember the plan?"

She nodded, her face turning serious. "Yeah. You're going to stroll up to his house in hopes that he's home. From there, you're going to ask him to let you in, and then you're going to confront him. With any luck, he'll try to attack you. You let him go just far enough so there's evidence that he actually tried to hurt you. From there, you'll blast him with an energy ball, which will knock him unconscious, and then you'll call the police. They'll arrive and see a young woman in distress after a man tried to assault her, and they'll arrest him. With any luck, they can link his DNA to the various crime sites from the previous attacks, and *voila!* We have our serial attacker in prison for the foreseeable future."

"My thoughts exactly."

I was about to step out of the vehicle when her hand shot out and grabbed me. "Lena? What if it *doesn't* go to plan?"

I debated how to answer her. “If I couldn’t control energy, I wouldn’t trust this plan, either. But I *can*. I can stop Aaron in a second if I want to, and this plan will also prevent him from running. You heard Luke. It sounded like Aaron was packing up, and if he leaves now, he’ll just go somewhere new and attack women all over again. I can’t let that happen.”

Mica nodded tightly. “Okay, but if I see anything that makes me think you’re in trouble, I’m calling the cops and our family. Got it?”

“Yeah, please do, but don’t worry. I got this.”

She grimaced before squeezing me one last time. “Famous last words.”

I laughed hollowly and closed the door, hoping she was wrong.

My feet tapped on the sidewalk as I walked toward Aaron’s house. Streetlights clicked on as I passed them. The evening was truly growing dark.

Sweat lined my palms, and I rubbed them on my thighs. While the plan in my mind seemed sound, Mica had a point. If something went wrong, this could go drastically south in no time.

I chewed my lip as I pondered what could happen. I didn’t want to think about what Aaron could do if he *did* get the upper hand. Assaults didn’t take long to occur. The police might not arrive in time if that happened. And if Flint found out Aaron assaulted me, he’d go crazy and potentially expose his powers in a rage.

I swallowed tightly. *I won’t let that happen. I’ll use my power and keep the situation under control. This will be fine as long as I keep my cool.*

With that thought firmly in place, I picked up my pace. I reached his house a minute later. A light illuminated the living room. *Hopefully, he’s still here.*

I stepped up to the front door on the concrete porch. Aaron’s home was surprisingly large and well maintained. Beautiful rose bushes lined the flower beds below the front window off to the right, and the siding looked freshly painted. A few feet from the front door, a lounge chair sat on the porch. A small table with an ashtray was next to it. Several cigarette butts were squished into it.

Weird. I don’t remember Aaron being a smoker.

Pushing that thought aside, I lifted my hand and knocked on the front door.

Silence came from the other side.

I lifted my hand again and knocked with more vigor.

Nothing.

I then hit the doorbell. A singsong tone came from within just as a sinking feeling started in the pit of my stomach. *Did he already leave?*

But then footsteps sounded on the other side, and the door opened.

Aaron's frame dominated the doorway. My vision switched of its own accord. His ugly, writhing black cloud swirled around his shoulders. I remembered it so clearly now. At times, it resembled a slick eel that slithered and slunk around his skull. Sometimes it was like a tidal wave that roared over him as if it might pound its victim at any moment.

He opened the door wider and smiled. Behind him were stacks of bags and a few boxes. Luke had been right. Apparently, Aaron was planning to head out of town.

I got here just in time!

"To what do I owe this pleasure?" He stepped to the side to allow me in. "Would you like to come in?" He leered.

I balled my hands into fists and shoved them into my jacket pockets. As I stepped into his house, the first thing I registered was the scent of cigarette smoke—that and the expensive furniture and university pictures hanging on the wall. *So Aaron's a student?* But this place seemed too expensive for a student to afford, although Aaron did have working knowledge of the campus. He had to be a student or someone that worked at the university. Regardless, I didn't have time to wonder. Nervous energy swirled inside me when he closed the door behind me.

The sound of a bolt sliding into place came next.

Reminding myself that I was stronger than him and not trapped, I turned to face him. "I know you're the man assaulting women on campus."

His cocky smile faltered before he hid it behind a sardonic smile. "That's quite an accusation to make."

I took a sudden step toward him.

He stumbled back a step before righting himself. Fury flashed in his gaze. I could tell he didn't like how I'd taken the upper hand. Before, I'd always run from him, but a lot had changed since we'd last met.

"I know you've been following Abigail Jonas. I know you intended for her to be your next victim. And I *know* what you're capable of. All of us know that you tried to attack me two years ago on Pete and Val's ranch."

He put his hands on his hips and stepped forward. A flash of surprise crossed his eyes when I didn't retreat, but again, he quickly covered it.

When we were standing toe to toe, he looked down at me. “You have no proof of that.”

“I may not have proof, but we did tell the police about it. There’s a record of it in Little Raven’s Police Department.”

He laughed. “Do you think that really matters?”

I curled my fingers into my palms and forced myself to remain calm. More than anything, I wanted to wipe that smirk off his face, but I needed to maintain my cool. If he didn’t attack me, I had no way of proving that he assaulted women.

I needed him to come at *me*. Without that, the police would never arrest him. Instead, I would be the one harassing him by coming to his house and confronting him like this.

“It must kill you that I got away.”

His nostrils flared.

“All alone in the mountains with just little old me, and you still couldn’t catch me. How did that make you feel when I escaped?”

Something flashed in his eyes, something dark and malevolent. “But now you’re here. And you’re ripe for the picking.”

He took a step forward, forcing me back, but there was still a room to my side. I wasn’t cornered as his cloud grew and pulsed in a way that I knew meant he was going to act *now*.

I pulled the energy from all around me, calling on the animal and plant life forces from outside. Within a second, I had a huge energy ball, ready to do my bidding. “I don’t think so. You won’t have the upper hand this—”

My words cut off as I felt the presence of another energy filling the room. I spun around just in time to see a bat coming down on my head. And the hands that gripped the bat created a shock in me so great that my power vanished.

Professor Dillinger!

My teacher’s face registered in my mind before everything went black.

CHAPTER TWELVE

My body shifted, moving and swaying as a pounding headache pummeled my mind. Something rolled into me. Groggily, I opened my eyes.

A large wad of something filled my mouth. “What the . . .” I tried to say the words out loud but couldn’t.

My eyes flew open. *I can’t breathe!*

Darkness surrounded me as I frantically tried to clear my mouth of whatever filled it, but my hands were pinned. My breathing increased as the sickening taste of dirty cotton coated my mouth. *Something’s in my mouth! And my mouth is taped closed!*

When I kicked out, my feet encountered a hard panel, and I realized my legs were restrained in addition to my arms. Fighting, I tried to free my arms from behind my back, but something hard and thin cut into my wrists. *What’s happening?*

And then it all came crashing back. Memories returned like bullets from a machine gun.

Aaron. Professor Dillinger. The bat.

They bound and gagged me!

My head swam. Blackness threatened to descend again. I forced myself to take slower and deeper breaths since I was hyperventilating, but that was hard around the gag.

Breathe in. Breathe out. Okay, stay calm. Figure this out!

The shifting and moving were the biggest indicators of my location. But the thin line of light coming in through the cramped space, the muffled voices to my left, and the road noise made it very apparent I was tied up in the back of a trunk.

Crap!

The memory of turning to see my professor lifting the bat surfaced again. He’d hit me over the head. No wonder I had a pounding headache

and my head felt tender. I probably had a goose egg the size of Staten Island on my scalp.

So Professor Dillinger and Aaron are working together? But how can that be?

I closed my eyes and tried to listen to their words. I recognized the muffled, nasal cadence of my slimy teacher's voice from the front of the car. He was talking to Aaron. But between the jostles, dips, and road noise, I could barely hear them.

Listen harder!

I closed my eyes and concentrated.

". . . is going too far, Aaron." Professor Dillinger's voice was lined with anxiety. "I never agreed to something like this. We've kidnapped her!"

Aaron must have replied, but I couldn't hear him. The next words came from my professor.

". . . raping someone isn't killing them. We can't—"

"The bitch deserves to die!" Aaron snarled.

My heart pounded, and I struggled to breathe. I'd definitely heard *that.*

I was in deep shit—really, really deep shit. Flint was going to kill me. I laughed hysterically around the gag. *Unless Aaron kills me first.*

"Aaron, think about it. This is different from the stuff we did as kids, the stuff we've been doing lately!" My professor's voice grew stronger. "If a woman tried to say we'd raped her, we could deny it, and without proof, the law can't do anything to us, but murder, Aaron? This is a new one, even for you."

"Losing your nerve already, brother?"

Brother? Professor Dillinger is Aaron's brother?

My chest rose and fell so quickly that I had to make myself slow it down. I pictured my teacher. He also had dark hair and a stocky build. He had to be at least ten years older than Aaron, maybe even fifteen, but it was possible they were related.

I groaned and wanted to kick the trunk again but knew that would alert them to me being awake. My actions were so stupid. I should never have confronted Aaron. Flint had been right, and now I was going to die.

No! You're not going to die, Lena. Stay calm. You're strong. Use your power!

I welled up the energy inside me and then pulled the energy from my cloud along with Aaron's cloud and my professor's. I just needed to get my

wrists and ankles worked free. *And getting this damned duct tape off my face along with the gag in my mouth would be nice too.* Dry cotton sat on my tongue. It tasted like an old sweaty handkerchief. *Yuck!*

Using my ability, I wielded the energy around my back to the restraints. My cloud felt along it. The sensations transferred to my mind.

I groaned. They'd used zip ties on my wrists! Those were nearly impossible to break unless I had a sharp object.

I didn't have time to figure it out, though. The car slowed and pulled over. The sound of gravel under tires came next. That wasn't good. If we were on a gravel road, that meant we were somewhere remote.

Lena, think your way out of this! You can still form energy balls even if you can't get the zip ties off.

That meant I could still blast Aaron and my professor. They still wouldn't be able to reach me if I kept them at bay. I could knock them out so they wouldn't be a threat.

I would just have to hold them off until help arrived. *Oh, please, Mica, tell me you've called the cops!*

The car stopped, bringing with it the sound of squeaking brakes. More arguing came from the front of the car.

"Aaron, we can't do this. We can't kill her!" Professor Dillinger's muffled voice sounded frantic.

"If you can't do it, then stay in the car. I'll take care of her after I've had a little fun. It's something I should have finished long ago."

The fear that had been building inside of me gave way to anger. *What a sick bastard!*

A car door opened and slammed. Footsteps sounded outside. I closed my eyes and pretended to still be unconscious. The more I could take Aaron by surprise, the better.

A pop sounded as Aaron disengaged the trunk's lock. Cool nighttime air washed across my cheeks when he lifted the lid. He didn't say anything, but I guessed he was looking at me. Rage built inside me as I called upon the energy from the surrounding plants and animals. From the feel of it, we were in a forest.

You're not going to win this time!

Aaron's hands brushed against my cheeks, as if he was going to snake his hand around my neck, just as I slammed the ball into him.

He yelped in pain and flew from the vehicle.

“What the hell?” Another slamming car door sounded from the front. Footsteps came from the other side. I knew Professor Dillinger had hopped out of the vehicle to investigate.

Even though my teacher had tried to convince Aaron to not kill me, he’d still raised a bat to my head and done all those awful things to my classmates. *And who knows what else he’s been doing to help Aaron.*

When the professor rounded the back of the car, I had an energy ball ready, but I hesitated. Genuine remorse filled his eyes.

The power around me lessened as my breathing came faster. *Maybe he’ll help me.*

I struggled again, hoping he’d pull off the gag or loosen the restraints. I pleaded with him with my eyes.

My professor ran a hand through his hair as Aaron got to his feet.

“Watch out. The bitch just kicked me.”

Ha! So Aaron thought my ball was a kick.

I tried as hard as I could to talk through the gag, and when my professor reached down, hope welled up inside me. He reached toward my head.

He’s going to take the gag off!

Stars shone in my head as pain suddenly exploded in my skull.

My professor’s fingers tangled though my hair. He had lifted my head so fast that I hadn’t been able to ready myself when he slammed it back down.

Aaron laughed. “Don’t knock her around too much. I want her awake for this.”

Panic bloomed in my chest at his words. *No!* My head was still spinning when Aaron appeared at his brother’s side. As they stood next to one another, I could see the resemblance as my vision swam in and out of focus.

“Let’s get her out.” The professor panted. “She’s seen my face now. You’re right. She needs to die.”

My eyes widened at his words. Both men reached for me as panic built up inside me. I called upon the energy, but it was hard. My head still felt so dizzy.

Do it, Lena! Do it now, or they’ll kill you!

As my professor’s hands clamped around my ankles, I hurled a ball at him. It was weak compared to what I could conjure, but he still screamed

and flew twenty feet before slamming against a tree. He sank to the ground and didn't move.

"What the hell?" Aaron's brow furrowed.

Sitting upright, I struggled against the zip ties around my ankles and wrists. They didn't budge. *Dammit!*

"I don't know how you kicked him like that, but you're going to pay now." Aaron's voice turned cold.

I called upon the energy again, but I was still too dizzy. My reactions were slow. Aaron ripped the tape off my face and pulled the rag from my mouth. "I want to hear you scream when I kill you." My eyes widened in shock just as he punched me in the stomach.

I curled into the fetal position as the wind was knocked out of my lungs.

Aaron laughed again.

My stomach heaved as my lungs refused to inflate. I tried to force myself to breathe.

I couldn't.

"Not so tough now, are you?" he taunted.

I met his gaze as rage consumed me. Still struggling to breathe, I managed to suck in just enough air to say, "You haven't seen the half of it."

Aaron's hysterical laughter filled the forest as cool wind whipped through the trees. "You always were a little spitfire. It's what made me want you."

Red filled my vision, and I finally sucked in a full breath. Power radiated along my limbs as I called upon every living life force within the vicinity. *He's going to pay!*

But then reality crashed upon me. *I can't unleash that much power on him. How will I explain it to the police?*

Aaron moved closer to me, his movements confident.

Fear coiled tightly in my belly as my thoughts ran at rapid fire. Here I was, completely restrained, yet my professor was already unconscious on the ground. That could be explained by a well-placed kick, but even that was unlikely. But if I slammed my balls into Aaron and broke every bone in his body, the police would demand answers.

I'm going to have to do this the hard way.

I gulped. That wouldn't be easy.

“Lena, Lena.” Aaron made a tsking sound. “It’s too bad my brother’s out cold, or he’d enjoy the little game I have lined up for us before you die.” He pulled a knife from his back pocket. My eyes bulged as the newspaper stories filled my mind. The women had all said the man was brutal. Deep cuts and broken bones had left their bodies a wreck.

Aaron advanced.

Get the knife away from him.

I summoned a ball just as he pulled the knife back. Rapid breathing filled my chest as I tangled my ball around his fingers.

Aaron frowned, his arm frozen mid-arc. “What the hell?”

Wrapping my energy ball around his fingers, I tethered my power to him like an octopus latching on its tentacles.

Aaron shook his hand.

I pried his fingers back one by one.

He yelped and jumped back. The knife dropped from his hand.

Confusion and rage filled his gaze. He held his wrist with his opposite hand and stared down at his limb as if it didn’t belong to him.

Sitting up straighter in the trunk, I once again manipulated my ball into long, thin strands. Sweat poured from my brow at the exertion. Doing so should not have been this hard, but my head was still fuzzy.

Ignoring the pounding headache filling my skull, I wrapped my cloud around the knife and lifted it.

Aaron’s eyes widened so much that his eyeballs looked as if they would pop out of his head. “Motherfucker! Do you see that?”

“Who do you think’s doing it, you creep?” I replied as I flung the knife at him.

The sharp blade cut through his jeaned thigh and embedded itself deeply into muscle. Aaron howled in pain. I ripped the knife from his leg just as he tried to grab it.

Blood poured from his wound. The copper scent flooded my nose.

Aaron covered the gash with both of his hands as veins bulged from his neck. He turned his murderous gaze on me. “You? You’re doing this?”

I opened my mouth to reply but knew I’d already said too much. If Aaron knew I hadn’t kicked his brother but had instead thrown him using an unseen power, he could try to knock me out again.

I couldn’t let that happen.

Pushing back against the trunk's edge, I feigned fear. Opening my eyes wide, I shook my head vigorously. "No! It wasn't me! How could I do that?"

Aaron took a limping step toward me, but I was faster. I flew the knife behind him and stabbed his other leg, just behind the knee. The slice went deep. I felt the tendon slash through.

Aaron howled loudly as he dropped to his knees. "You bitch!"

My heart pounded in my chest as he struggled to stand. *Just keep him down. Sooner or later, help will come! Just keep him down until then!*

I needed to keep him far enough away that he couldn't physically touch me. If he managed to knock me out again, I was done for.

Hold him off until help arrives! My heart rate increased. *If help arrives.*

I still didn't know how Aaron had taken me this far. The police and my family should have been tailing him if Mica had called for help. I could only assume that Mica didn't know they had driven away with me.

I moaned in frustration. *What if she's still back in front of the house, waiting on the street?* But surely she would have called for help by now.

Even if she did, they won't know where I've gone. They won't know how to find me. My heart quickened at that thought. *Unless Luke, Susannah, or Amber can track me.*

Aaron's labored breathing filled my ears as another cool breeze washed over my cheeks. He cursed and yelled in pain as he inched toward the trunk. He was shuffling on his knees now. *I need to end this. I need to knock him out but carefully. If I inflict too many wounds on him, I won't be able to explain myself.*

Using the knife again, I carefully wielded it around my back and down by my hands. *Hurry, Lena!* Aaron was almost to the trunk.

I felt along my wrists with the knife until I encountered resistance.

A bloody hand slammed down on the trunk's ledge.

"No!" I screamed and tried to kick out at him just as the knife sliced through the zip-tie.

Pain seared my wrist. I'd done the movement too quickly and had slashed skin. Ignoring the stinging pain, I lifted my foot and kicked Aaron's hand.

He yelped again just as I pulled my hands out from behind me.

Breathing heavily, I sat more upright and looked over the trunk's edge. Blood poured down my arm as Aaron's head suddenly popped up in my view.

He was only a foot away. "I got you now, you little bitch!"

An energy ball formed as instinct took over. Aaron clamped a bloody, meaty hand onto my lower leg just as I slammed the ball onto the top of his head.

He fell to the ground but not before wrenching me out with him.

I landed in a heap upon him and struggled to get away. With my hands free, I was able to push up, but my ankles were still bound. I fell down hard on my side as Aaron's head listed sluggishly.

My eyes widened since his body lay completely still. But the image of those hateful eyes flashing open had me scrambling back on the gravel. Tiny rocks cut into my palms, but I kept moving.

Only when I was at least five feet away did I stop.

A breath raised Aaron's chest.

He's not dead.

The scream of an eagle abruptly tore through the sky.

My gaze whipped up to see Susannah's giant wings soaring above. Relief escaped me in a giant sob. "Susannah!"

Tears formed in my eyes as she descended. *She used her psychic tracking ability to find me!* It was the only way she could have located me way out here. Wherever *here* was.

Susannah landed on the ground beside Aaron. Gravel shifted beneath her giant talons. The sound of them grating together filled the air.

"I'm so glad you're here!" I sobbed and wiped tears from my eyes. Warm blood from my wound smeared across my face, the stickiness coating my cheeks.

Using her giant beak, Susannah pecked at Aaron a few times. He didn't move, although his chest continued to rise and fall with each breath.

"I didn't kill him." I scooted to Susannah, the sharp rocks poking into my butt.

Susannah cocked her head as her large pale-yellow eyes looked me over.

"I'm not hurt too badly." My head still pounded, but my thoughts felt relatively clear. "But I can't walk since my ankles are still bound."

Susannah hopped closer to me and opened her beak. She leaned down to cut the tie around my ankles, but luckily, I pulled back just in time.

“No! You can’t, Suze! I need evidence that he tied me up. It’s going to be hard enough explaining how I got my hands free.”

Susannah stood upright again just as flashing police lights glowed in the distance.

I sat up straighter and grinned. “They’re coming!”

Susannah made a chirping sound before she hopped along the ground to where my professor lay. Since he still hadn’t moved, I knew he’d been knocked unconscious. A plan was already forming in my mind for how I’d explain this.

I’d say that I kicked the professor hard enough to knock him out and had then used a sharp edge in the trunk to break my wrists restraints. That resulted in Aaron and me getting into a fight. I was able to wrestle the knife from him and stab his legs. I certainly had enough cuts and bruises on me to make a scuffle believable.

Breathing heavily, I looked off in the distance. The lights were growing closer. “You better get out of here, Susannah. You know you can’t let them see you.”

She chirped again and hopped back my way.

As the police cruiser drew closer, more headlights appeared behind them. I could only hope it was Mica and the rest of my family.

Susannah jumped to my side and leaned her giant head down, brushing her white feathers against my cheek. Large, pale-yellow eyes met mine. I could have sworn they were filled with relief.

“I love you too. Now, get out of here before they see you.”

Her eagle scream tore through the air just as she took flight. Her giant wings flapped until she gained ground and disappeared into the sky.

The wailing sounds of the police siren filled my ears. The sound of their tires digging into the gravel came next. That was the sweetest sound I could imagine.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

An ambulance came to take Aaron and Professor Dillinger away. Neither regained consciousness in that time. I could only imagine the wild stories they'd come up with when they woke up, but I doubted anyone would believe Aaron if he said I stabbed him using supernatural powers.

I spent the rest of the night at the police station, telling the cops what I knew. They filled me in that multiple women had filed complaints against Professor Dillinger, but so far, nothing had been done about it. Relief filled me that he'd finally been stopped.

I also learned that Aaron was indeed Professor Dillinger's brother. According to phone records, Aaron had moved into the area to live with his brother six months before . . . right around the time the assaults had started.

When I confessed to the police officers that I'd gone to Aaron's house to confront him after I saw him on campus, their mouths dropped.

"You did what?" The older one's eyebrows rose. He had to be in his fifties and was mostly bald.

"I know it was stupid, but I couldn't let him get away. After seeing him today on campus, I guessed he might try to run again. It's what he did two years ago after he attacked me on our friend's ranch. There's a police report on it."

The officer nodded. "We've found it."

I glanced at Flint again, but he seemed locked in a silent battle with control. I'd never seen him so tense.

Flint had been at my side the entire time I spoke with the police. Energy poured from him, but he kept his rage in check. I knew as soon as we got home, I was going to get an earful, but I also knew he was beyond relieved that I was okay.

I turned back to the officer. "Aaron has probably been attacking women ever since he left Hideaway Hills. I couldn't let him continue."

The police officer sighed heavily while looking at me with his kind brown eyes. "You do know you could have been killed. What you did was

very dangerous.”

Flint tensed even more.

“Yeah. I know. I guess I’m lucky it didn’t turn out that way.”

The policeman shook his head and shared an incredulous look with his partner before turning back to taking notes.

Dawn had almost come by the time Flint and I left.

Flint didn’t speak to me as we walked to the station’s front doors, but he kept his arm around me and refused to let go.

I glanced up at him as we pushed through the doors. Outside, our entire family waited, including Jacinda and Father.

They all rushed at me, and I was engulfed in hugs. Mica apologized over and over again that it had taken her so long to call the police. Aaron and the professor had sneaked out on the back driveway road, so she didn’t see them leave.

Di and Raven scolded me for doing something so dangerous while holding me fiercely. The twins merely shook their heads with relieved smiles on their faces while Amber sniffled before giving me a tight squeeze.

Susannah, Luke, and Edgar let everyone hug me before they stepped forward.

I embraced Susannah in a tight hug. “Do you remember coming to the forest?”

She nodded as her long hair brushed against my cheek. “Of course. I knew I could get to you first, which is why I flew. I was ready to tear out another throat if I needed to.”

My eyes widened when I pulled back.

She laughed softly. “As a last resort, of course.”

I laughed with her before I turned to Luke and asked, “Did you see it? Did you see what was going to happen?”

Luke shook his head, as a stumped expression grew on his face. “Di always told me you were hard to track.” He crossed his muscular arms over his chest. “Until tonight, I didn’t fully appreciate that. None of us suspected anything until after you’d been taken. But then it was too late to stop you.”

I ducked my head and shrugged sheepishly. “Apparently, it’s my impulsiveness that can make it difficult to see my future.”

Edgar gave my hand a squeeze. “Just don’t make a habit of it. Okay, love? You really scared all of us.”

“I won’t.”

I glanced up at Flint, who still hovered at my side. Waves of power rolled from him. The fact that he still hadn't said anything did not bode well.

I swallowed tightly. "But Aaron's been caught now. The police said they have DNA evidence from the other assaults, so they should be able to tie him to those attacks too. And the professor has a line of women ready to testify against him. That, along with what he did to me, means they're both going to jail."

Fatigue lined Father's face as he pulled me into a tight embrace. "But you put yourself in danger, Lena. You shouldn't have done that."

Jacinda's sniffles came next when she grabbed my hand tightly and squeezed. "That was so dangerous!"

Guilt filled me at the worry I'd put my family through. I wrung my hands when I was finally free. "But I *had* to do it! I just had to! I hope eventually you'll all understand that. I couldn't let him get away. Not after what he'd done to me and what he was doing to the women in this town."

"I understand why you did it." Father straightened his glasses and dabbed at the corner of his eyes. "But it could have turned out much worse."

I darted a look at Flint before replying, "I know."

The ride back to our apartment was quick. Since everyone was exhausted from a sleepless night, especially following a night where we'd spent most of it on top of Abigail's roof, we agreed that everybody would return to their own homes to rest and recuperate. It was hard to believe in three short days, we had accomplished what we'd set out to do.

I smiled, knowing that. We'd found the serial attacker, he was currently being held without bail, and no more women had been hurt. And on top of that, he'd turned out to be Aaron. My attacker from two years ago was now facing justice, *and* my professor was finally being held accountable for his acts.

Retribution had most definitely arrived.

But my smile faltered as I kicked my shoes off in our entryway. In the process of doing all of that, I'd lied to my boyfriend, had treated my best friend horribly, and had deceived my family. My entire plan hadn't gone as smoothly as I'd hoped.

When the last of our family members finally left our apartment, Flint turned toward me. The rising sun illuminated the walls in our living room.

Fatigue rolled through my body, yet I had a feeling I wouldn't be sleeping anytime soon.

I stuffed my hands in my back pockets and winced when my jeans rubbed on the raw skin of my wrists. A puffy bandage covered my cut. I gave Flint a pleading look. "Say something."

Powerful waves of energy emanated from him. A muscle ticked in his jaw.

"I'm sorry, Flint. I know I lied to you, and I know I deceived you, but I couldn't let him get away. Please try to understand that!"

He stayed at the door's edge. His expression was unreadable.

"Please say something."

A full minute ticked by. The anxiety within me grew.

"What am I supposed to say?" He finally said softly. "How am I supposed to trust you?"

My stomach dropped. I rushed to him and wrapped my arms around his waist. He didn't hug me back. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry!"

He just stood there as I held onto him as tightly as I could. Finally, placing his hands on my shoulders, he pushed me away.

I swallowed tightly as tears filled my eyes. He'd never done that before.

"Relationships are supposed to be based on trust." His jaw tightened in anger. "You *broke* that trust."

My eyes widened as my heart pounded so hard I couldn't breathe. "What are you saying?"

He raked a hand through his hair. "I don't know." He strode away from the entryway into the living room and paced it a few times, never once meeting my gaze.

I stepped closer to him and stood directly in his path, which forced him to stop. I tentatively balled my hands in his shirt. Try as I might, I couldn't get my heart rate under control. It felt like it was galloping in my chest.

In a shaking voice, I said, "Flint. I know I messed up. I know that. But please understand I had to do it. I knew you wouldn't agree with my plan, and I *knew* you wouldn't let me go. That's why I didn't tell you."

Agony filled his dark eyes. "You could have died!"

I swallowed tightly. "But I didn't, and if I *hadn't* confronted him, he never would have been caught. He would have continued hurting women

for who knows how long." Tears spilled onto my cheeks. "Please understand that's why I did it."

"You should have told me." He pulled back, which forced me to let him go.

Frustration rose inside me. I seethed inwardly at how incredibly stubborn he could be. "And if I had told you, what would you have done?"

His dark eyes narrowed before he looked away.

I threw my hands up. "You *know* what you would have done! You would have tied me down to keep me from getting hurt, but I'm not that fragile, Flint! Don't you see that? You can't always protect me! Sometimes, you're going to have to let me go and understand that I'm an adult who can make my own decisions."

"Impulsive decisions?"

"That's not fair. It wasn't an impulsive decision. I actually thought it through and decided not telling you was the best decision."

"Even if that decision almost got you killed?"

"But it didn't!"

His eyes glittered in the morning sun. "You should have come to me, Lena. What you did was wrong."

I tilted my chin up as my cheeks flushed. "Maybe I should have, but you also need to not be so protective."

His brow furrowed. "I'm not *that* protective."

I snorted. "Seriously?"

He took a deep breath and said gruffly, "Okay. Maybe I am, but you would be too if you were in my position. You constantly do things that put you in danger."

"I'm not constantly doing things. Just *sometimes* doing things."

An aggrieved sigh escaped him. "Are you really not going to take any responsibility for this, babe?"

My shoulders fell, and I looked down. "Okay. Yeah. You're right. What I did was stupid and reckless. It wasn't fair to you or anyone in our family. I shouldn't have done it."

"But you'd do it again in a heartbeat, wouldn't you? If you had to do it all over again?"

I snapped my gaze up when I heard the hurt in his words.

Pain swam in his irises.

“Flint . . .” I stepped closer to him and tentatively laid my hands on his waist. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to hurt you.”

He looked away, breaking eye contact, but the pain stayed in his eyes, making my heart rip in pieces. “I know, Lena. I know you’re sorry.”

I placed my hand on his jaw and forced his gaze back to mine. “I know your protectiveness stems from everything we’ve been through. But right now, I need you to understand that I did what I needed to do.” I stepped even closer to him until our bodies brushed. “And it kills me that it hurt you so much, but please meet me halfway on this. If you weren’t so protective of me, I would have told you what I planned to do. I would have gone to *you*, not Mica, but I couldn’t because of how you always try to take control of the situation for me.”

With a groan, he pulled me tightly to him. “The thought of losing you scares me so damned much! It’s the only thing that will bring me to my knees.”

I clung to him, and his scent washed over me. My heart rate slowed at the feel of his arms around me and the absolute belief that everything would be okay between us. “I know, and I love you just as much as you love me, and you’re right. I lied to you. I shouldn’t have done that. It’s horrible that I did that.” I paused as those words sank in—*really* sank in. “I won’t do that again. Next time, I’ll come to you. I won’t lie, but can you try to listen and not fly off the handle? Can we both work on this?”

A heavy breath filled his chest. “Yeah. I’ll try to, but it’s not easy for me.”

I squeezed him tightly. “I know, just like it’s not easy for me to not rush headfirst into things.”

“I guess we both have stuff to work on.”

I muffled a laugh. “We probably always will. It’s hard to fight instinct. And my instinct was to rush after Aaron before he could leave town.”

“And mine was to tie you to the bed.”

I laughed then, a real laugh. Pulling back just enough to place my hands on his chest, I asked, “So what do we do from here?”

He sighed heavily. “If you promise to come to me first if anything dangerous like this happens again, I promise to listen to you and try to work with you. Deal?”

Tears filled my eyes. I loved this man so damned much. “Deal.”

He leaned down and nuzzled my neck.

I trembled when his hands gripped me around the waist. “Thank you for loving me like you do,” I said breathlessly. His tongue was doing amazing things just below my ear, making all coherent thought threaten to vanish.

He nipped my skin lightly. “Maybe in fifty years, we’ll have all of our issues sorted out, and then we’ll never fight again.”

“If we’re lucky, maybe it will only be twenty years.”

He laughed before scooping me into his arms. In a blurred move, he raced us to our bedroom. Laying me gently on the covers, he tenderly pushed a lock of hair from my face. “Does it hurt anywhere?”

I shrugged. “The skin around my wrists and ankles is raw, and my shoulders are still a bit sore from our excursion on Abigail’s roof, but this is nothing compared to being trapped in Marcus’s mansion.”

His jaw clenched as the sun grew brighter outside. “We’re never going to lead truly *normal* lives, are we?”

I shrugged. “Probably not, but you know what? This life is pretty damn good. And it certainly isn’t boring.”

He smiled and tilted my chin up. “No, it certainly isn’t.”

And then he kissed me.

EPILOGUE

Grace sat across from me in the smoothie shop. I was bone tired, but she didn't know that. I'd skipped class again after the attack with Aaron, but I was back to school today. Despite all that had happened, I had made myself get up and come to class. We were at the end of the semester, after all, and finals were right around the corner.

However, my best friend still wouldn't meet my gaze. My shoulders slumped. Her anger was understandable. I had hardly been a good friend to her lately.

Keeping her eyes averted, she sucked her drink and picked up the newspaper. Her eyes shifted across the words as she read the front page.

"Did you see this article?" Grace twirled her straw and pointed at the daily newspaper that somebody had left on the table. Outside, the sun beat down.

I struggled to keep my eyes open as I glanced at it. "What article?"

Grace rolled her eyes and pointed at the front headline. *Serial Attacker and Accomplice Caught—University Stunned That It's One of Their Own.*

"This one," she said.

I ducked my head and took a huge slurp from my smoothie so she wouldn't see my satisfied smile. "Oh. Yeah. I saw that. I'm glad they've been arrested."

She swiveled the paper back her way and bit her lip before saying quietly, "You were right about him—Professor Dillinger. I should have listened to you."

I shrugged and did my best to ease the guilty look on her face. "It's fine. I know you always assume everyone is as good as you, but they're not."

Her brow furrowed more. "They said a woman, who police said preferred to remain unnamed, had been tied up in his trunk when they caught him and that guy." She shuddered.

Under the table, I fingered the raw skin around my wrists. Since I was wearing a long-sleeved shirt, it wasn't visible for anyone to see.

"I'm sure glad she's okay," Grace added. "Whoever she is." My best friend took another sip of her drink and then pushed the drink away. "Are you ready to get going? We better head to the library since our final's tomorrow morning."

She stood before I could reply. The haste with which she moved made her chair squeak against the floor.

The guilt inside me grew. Grace had, once again, forgiven my erratic behavior willingly and without question, but I could tell that she was still hurt by how I'd been treating her lately.

Outside, Grace walked at my side, but her usual smile was absent.

I squinted in the bright sun and took a deep breath of the fresh springtime air. Wringing my hands, I once again debated if I should come clean with Grace and tell her who I really was. She'd been my best friend for over a year and had proven she was loyal and trustworthy time and time again. Yet the rules Father had instilled in us since childhood were hard to overcome. He was so terrified of us being exposed.

But Grace isn't like that. She would never tell anyone.

Taking a deep breath, I grabbed her hand and stopped her mid-stride.

Her long blond hair swung over her shoulders from the abrupt stop, and she almost tripped. "Jeez, Lena. What the heck?" The familiar annoyance flashed in her eyes, but when she got a look at my expression, it vanished.

"What's wrong?" Her eyebrows drew together.

A few other people passed us on the sidewalk, some muttering under their breaths when they bumped into us. I pulled her closer to a storefront.

"Can we go back to my apartment to study?" I still gripped her hand tightly.

The worried look on her face grew. "Um . . . yeah. Okay." She gripped my hand back. "Are you all right? Because remember, Lena, you can tell me if something's wrong. I'm always here for you."

I chewed my lip before closing my eyes. *She's your best friend, Lena. She's been nothing but supportive and kind to you since you met her, and her cloud is pure white. You can trust her. Of all the people you've met, Grace is someone you can trust with your life.*

"Lena?" Her tone grew even more concerned.

Taking a deep breath, I opened my eyes. “I want to tell you something about me, Grace. I should have told you a long time ago, but I can’t do it here, not out in public. Will you come back to my apartment with me?”

She gripped my hand again. “Of course. Wherever you want to talk, and whatever you want to tell me, I’ll listen. I’ll always listen. You know that.”

Tears threatened to fill my eyes at how lucky I was to have a friend like her. “I know, and that’s why you deserve to know the truth.”

“The truth?” She cocked her head.

I lifted the sleeves on my shirt to expose the red skin on my wrists.

Her breath sucked in. “Oh my gosh, Lena! What happened?”

I nodded in the direction of the smoothie shop. “Remember that article about the girl in the trunk?”

Her mouth parted as her eyes widened in shock. She looked down at my wrists again. Understanding dawned in her eyes. “What . . . How . . . *You* were that girl?”

I nodded tightly.

“But . . . how did you get away?”

I smiled, the first real smile I’d had all day, as a huge weight lifted off my shoulders. “Come on. I have a lot to tell you.”

CREATION

The Lost Children World
Book Two

THE LOST CHILDREN SERIES—BOOK 5

CHAPTER ONE

The wind pounded in my ears as my paws thundered across the ground. Dense woods surrounded me as I loped around the trees.

I'd never experienced anything like this. The freedom. The sights and sounds. *And the air* . . . The breeze carried more than just smells. The wind that whipped over my lolling tongue had a taste . . . like leaves, rain, earth, and moss.

Slowing my pace, my nose twitched as a new scent caught my interest. Looping back, I trotted to a patch of pine needles and leaves that littered the forest floor. I stopped. Something about this area was different. I lowered my head and buried my nose in the leaves.

Snuffling, I moved my head along, catching that strangely alluring smell again. *There*. I stopped at a patch of leaves. A few drops of something wet and sticky coated them.

I sniffed more.

My body trembled, and an excited whine erupted from me. *Blood*. An injured animal had passed through here only moments ago. The blood was fresh. Raw.

Lifting my head, I howled. The sound filled the trees.

I'm going to kill.

The sheer anticipation left my body rippling with eager unspent energy.

I took off as I caught the trail. Drops of crimson blood dotted the forest floor. Once again, I thundered across the land. Branches and brush snagged against my fur, but I didn't slow.

Movement ahead caught my attention. The smell grew stronger. A deer. It was limping but was still trying valiantly to run. A hunter's arrow protruded from its hind end.

Enough of my human mind still functioned to recognize that whoever had shot it wasn't a skilled hunter. This deer had escaped his grasp. Most likely, it had been running for hours and would die slowly over days.

But now it will die soon.

My pace increased.

I lunged at the last moment. The deer didn't know I was upon it until my teeth sank into its flesh. The deer's scream of pain filled my ears as blood rushed into my mouth.

Yes!

But just as elation coursed through my veins, a touch of revulsion did too. My human mind registered the feel of warm flesh ripping between my teeth. *What's happening to me? Why am I doing this?*

Another scream filled the air, joining the deer's pitiful cries.

Except this scream was human.

~ ~ ~

"Jacinda!" Luke roared.

My eyes snapped open as I bolted upright in bed. An ear-piercing scream continued to fill my ears.

My scream.

I stopped screaming abruptly as my surroundings registered. Soft sheets. A dark room. Luke's hulking form beside me.

Sweat poured from my face as Luke clutched my upper arms.

"Jacinda! My love! It's okay. It was just a dream." His thick fingers threaded through my damp hair as he pushed blond locks from my face.

A dream. It was the dream again.

My breath came out in harsh pants. With frantic movements, I fingered my mouth and moved my tongue. My lips were dry. And nothing coated the inside of my mouth. *No blood.*

I frowned. For some bizarre reason, that realization was strangely . . . upsetting. That was a first following the dream. Usually, I felt nothing but disgust after I woke from biting into the deer's haunches.

Pushing that unsettling fact to the side, I tucked my hair behind my ears with shaky fingers.

"How long was I screaming?" I turned to Luke. The bed dipped so heavily in his direction, I slid into him. Even my large belly didn't weigh me down enough to keep me in place.

Luke's muscled arms caught me and pulled me close. "Less than a minute. It was the thrashing that woke me first. Your legs and arms were

wind-milling.”

“Wind-milling?”

“As if you were running.”

As if I was running in my sleep. I ducked my chin as embarrassment flooded me. No doubt, I had once again resembled a dog as it dozed on the floor. Snout twitching, legs scissoring, as if acting out whatever dreams canines had.

Heat filled my cheeks. I had to be a sight: sweaty, damp hair, the scent of perspiration clinging to my skin, and legs twitching like an animal.

I already itched to take a shower—to feel human again. The thought of blow-drying my hair and spritzing on a dash of perfume had me wanting to climb out of bed and run to the bathroom.

But that wouldn’t stop the dreams. It wouldn’t stop what had been plaguing me my entire pregnancy.

What’s wrong with me?

The baby kicked. He felt like he was doing somersaults in my abdomen.

I cradled my swollen belly protectively. My skin was taut and smooth. Already, I was thirty-one weeks. *Were you dreaming of the forest too, my little one?*

Luke’s massive palm covered mine, his callouses rough on the back of my hand. When the baby kicked again, he grunted. “He’s strong. Did you feel that one? This little pup wants to meet his papa.” Luke’s golden eyes glowed in the dark room. Even though they were full of pride, I caught another emotion in them too—worry.

My dreams were growing more intense. The closer my due date became, the more it felt like my mind was no longer my own. Before becoming pregnant, the thought of running through the woods or tasting blood would have made my nose wrinkle in disgust.

But now . . .

I rubbed my belly again. *Is that what you want to do, my little one? To run in the woods with your papa? To chase deer? To taste blood?*

Though fierce love filled me every time I thought of our baby, I couldn’t stop the gnawing fear that something was wrong. I’d felt that way my entire pregnancy, and once again, terror slid through me in icy trails. *What if he’s born a wolf? What if he’s not human at all?*

Over and over, I'd had nightmares of people seeing me with our baby. Of him being mistaken for our new puppy by those who did not realize the precious little one who trotted by my feet had been birthed between my own legs.

I rubbed my belly more, my movements growing faster. Inside me, our little one kicked and squirmed.

"Shh, my love." Luke pried my hands away and locked me in his arms.

I tried to stop the worries that filled my mind, but it was no use. "I'm so scared."

"I know."

Given Luke's and my unique genetics, there was no knowing what our baby would look like. The only comfort I took was in the ultrasounds that Father and Di, my adopted sister, had done. They'd showed a fetus with arms, legs, and human hands. Not paws.

They kept telling me everything was fine.

But I knew it wasn't.

I shouldn't be having these dreams. I shouldn't dream of meat and blood if my baby is human. That's not normal. Only animals want to chase prey and sink their teeth into them.

And even though Luke could transform into a wolf, he was still very much human, and he said he rarely had dreams of hunting in wolf form.

But such were *my* dreams. And instead of going away, they were increasing.

The dreams only reminded me that nothing about my pregnancy was normal. The bloodwork Di and Father had processed showed lupine DNA in my blood-stream. DNA that wasn't mine circulated through my body. DNA that was like Luke's. DNA that was our baby's.

For whatever reason, my pregnancy wasn't like most humans'. My blood intermixed with the fetus's.

Strangely, I had no adverse reaction to our mixing blood. Father said the baby's blood was compatible with my own. Therefore, each of us was safe. I shuddered to think what might have happened if our bloods *weren't* compatible.

Di hadn't known that I had overheard her one day as she and Father discussed the gravity of someone reacting to incompatible blood. I'd been three rooms away, but my hearing had been turned up. Apparently, bad

things could happen during blood transfusions, and if incompatible bloods mixed—a person could die.

Or our baby could die.

The blare of the city filtered through our bedroom windows, snapping me from my morbid thoughts, which at times felt like a runaway freight train. Even at the late hour, Denver was wide awake.

My hearing was currently turned up, as it often was when I woke from the dreams. Wincing, I mentally turned it down. The screaming car horns and the squeal of tires around corners below quieted. So did Luke's sounds. His heartbeat had been so loud, it sounded like the pounding surf only inches from my head. His breathing hadn't been any better. He was worried. That was evident in his harsh panting that he was trying valiantly to hide.

"My love? Do you want to lie back down?" He turned me in his arms, his hard chest pressing against my side. Coarse hairs peppered his pectoral muscles. I threaded my fingers through them.

"I'm okay," I managed. The need to shower was still pulling at me.

"Was it the deer dream?"

I nodded. "Yes, only this time, it felt even more . . . real." I'd been certain blood filled my mouth when I woke.

Footsteps padded outside our room. They sounded like a bass drum. *Turn your hearing down more.* I pushed it down another notch as our door squeaked open. I winced and turned my hearing down again.

Must get that door hinge fixed.

"Is she okay?" Susannah's soft voice carried into the room. My adopted sister had whispered, but I still heard it crystal clear. She probably thought I'd fallen back to sleep.

"I'm fine, Susannah," I replied before Luke could. "I'm sorry. Did I wake you again?" My shoulders drooped. It seemed nobody in our home was sleeping well these days.

Susannah shrugged and padded into the room. She stopped at the foot of our bed.

Standing in a thin T-shirt that draped to her knees, she looked like an ethereal dark angel. Her long black hair tumbled down her back, and her snow-white skin glowed in the night lighting.

As the sounds of downtown Denver blared upward from dozens of stories below, city lights filtered in through our curtains, making our penthouse condo feel alive in its own way.

I could see Susannah's face clearly. Worry made her full mouth pucker.

"Was it one of the recurring dreams?" Her soft voice was filled with concern.

"Yes."

She padded to my side. "Do you want me to brush your hair? That worked last time when you couldn't sleep because of the dreams."

I took her hand and squeezed it gently. "Sure. That would be nice." I scooted over to give her room on the bed beside Luke and me. It was so strange to have Luke and her dote on me every night.

Normally, before I'd become pregnant, I'd been the caretaker in our family. That was how I preferred it, but I also knew giving them something to do made them feel useful, as if their nervous energy could be morphed into something that prevented disaster.

Susannah's small hand reached for the brush on the nightstand.

"Here, move forward a little." Susannah guided me to be in front of her then began combing my hair in long strokes.

Luke moved down in the bed and picked up my lower leg. His strong fingers kneaded the arch of my left foot. It sent calming tingles up my nerves.

"Thank you," I murmured.

"Just try to fall back asleep," Luke whispered. "You've only been sleeping for two hours."

My eyes drifted to the clock as the baby kicked again—3:52 a.m. *Another sleepless night.*

"But what about you two?" I tried to turn so I could better assess how Susannah was faring, but she gently pushed me forward again.

"Luke and I have no problems falling asleep. Don't worry about us. Just try to relax enough to sleep again."

I tried to argue. I truly did. I hated that my pregnancy was affecting each of them so much. A few times in the past month, I'd suggested to Susannah that she move in with Di and Raven, or Father, Amber, and Edgar. Surely, she would get better rest there.

But each time, Susannah denied my suggestions. She was as stubborn as Luke in that department. As was the rest of my family . . .

My half-sister, Lena, had begun visiting every weekend to do what she could to help. Flint often accompanied her. More than once, the two of them had been the ones to soothe me during the night when the dreams became

too much. Thankfully, their help had allowed Luke and Susannah to have a few nights of untroubled sleep.

“Shh, my love.” Luke’s strong hands worked their magic as Susannah’s rhythmic brushing made my eyes drift closed. “Go to sleep.”

Susannah shifted, which allowed me to fall back against the pillows. My eyes were closing when I felt her stand.

“They’re getting worse.” Her soft statement floated to me, but already, I was slipping under.

“I know. She barely sleeps at all now.”

Our door closed with a squeak when Susannah left the room.

Luke moved to my side, his fingers massaging my back. His hard form pressed against me from behind as his free arm locked possessively around my swollen middle. But what he didn’t know was that I still heard his thundering heart.

As much as he tried to hide his worry from me, it was still there.

It was always there.

CHAPTER TWO

Dark circles lined the bottoms of my eyes. I stared at them in dismay before snapping my compact closed.

I sat in my car at the front of my favorite salon. It was my second facial appointment this week even though these appointments did little to alleviate the bags under my eyes.

But even though I had to get back to work soon, I didn't move. Memories of the dreams still haunted me.

After finally falling asleep for a second time last night, I'd bolted awake not even an hour later. The second recurring dream, the dream of me giving birth, had left me shaky and sweaty. Snapping jaws and a furry tail had emerged from my womb. My own child had bitten me upon entering the world.

Not for the first time, I questioned if I should continue working. We certainly didn't need the money, and sleepless nights plagued me relentlessly. But I enjoyed my job, and so many women worked right up until they gave birth. In a way, I knew I would feel like a failure if I couldn't do that too. *But most women don't have pregnancies like mine.*

An engine started beside my parked vehicle, jolting me back to the present. Its driver waved at me.

Marcella. She was another regular at the salon. I waved back and forced a smile before checking my watch.

Shoot. It's 12:15 already. I didn't have much time. I was here on my lunch hour. The daycare I worked at was jam-packed today. It was a miracle I'd been given a break at all.

I opened my door and stepped out. Bright sunlight and ninety-degree July heat assaulted me on the sidewalk. My leather flats tapped on the concrete as sweat beaded on my upper lip.

Bella greeted me when I entered the salon. "Hi, Jacinda!"

A rush of air-conditioning cooled my skin as I walked to the counter. Thankfully. It was so hot out every day lately. Summer's heat was in full

swing.

A flash of annoyance filled me as Bella typed in my name to look up my appointment. It came out of nowhere—a rush of irritation and anger.

Startled, I instinctively cradled my abdomen as Bella moved her computer mouse around. When she finished, she smiled.

“I have you all checked in.” Her smile faltered when she looked up.

I quickly smoothed whatever expression I wore.

Bella’s gaze dropped to my belly. “That baby still keeping you awake at night?”

I stiffened. “Is it that obvious?” The comment snapped from my mouth like someone smacking a wet dish towel against the counter.

Her smile vanished. “Oh, um . . . I didn’t mean anything by it. I just noticed you look tired, but it’s nothing Vanessa can’t fix. You know she’s a magician with skin care.” She shuffled a few papers awkwardly as her gaze dipped.

Guilt smothered the irritation that flared in me. I never snapped at people like that. *What’s wrong with me?*

A flutter of anxiety wafted through my veins as I walked on stiff legs to a waiting room chair. Bella was always so friendly and bubbly. She didn’t deserve how I’d just treated her.

I pulled my full bottom lip into my mouth and chewed on it.

“Jacinda?”

My head whipped up so hard a crick formed in my neck.

Vanessa appeared in the arched doorway that led deeper into the salon, a smile plastered on her face. “Ready to come back?”

I pushed to a stand. The baby kicked again. “Yes. Yes, of course.”

She smiled warmly and began walking. Her long brown hair was pulled up in a stylish bun today. Two sticks held it in place. “How many weeks are you now?”

“Almost thirty-two.” Another flutter of irritation filled me. *Why does everyone keep asking about my pregnancy? It’s none of their damned business!*

That abrupt thought made me pause mid-stride. Vanessa continued forward, oblivious to my faltered step.

My breathing increased. *What the hell is the matter with me?*

I made myself resume walking, but the spiteful comments inside me continued throughout my entire appointment. Anytime Vanessa asked about

the baby, made a comment about my pregnancy, or looked at me the wrong way, I had to purse my lips to keep from lashing out. The few times she glanced at my swollen belly, I'd had to physically stop myself from snarling and cradling my belly possessively.

By the time I left my appointment—an appointment that usually brought me joy and peace—I felt like a she-wolf ready to sink my teeth into someone.

I was shaking when I returned to work. Luckily, the little ones I took care of never asked about my due date. They just crawled over me, drooling, giggling, and wanting to be held.

I cuddled a ten-month-old to my chest. She'd been missing her mom horribly, and I did my best to soothe her. Thankfully, she found solace nibbling on my knuckle. I let her chew away as a one-year-old toddled toward me on unsteady legs. I reached out with my free arm and steadied her when she pitched forward.

"Oooh, Clare Bear. You big girl. Look at you go!"

She just giggled and toddled to another area in the room.

For the first time all day, the malicious thoughts and raging temper disappeared, but once my shift was over and I was packing up, the venomous thoughts returned. Anytime one of my coworkers glanced at my belly or stepped too close, it took everything in me to not snap.

By the time I got home, I felt like an emotional wreck. After stepping into the entryway, I closed the door behind me and crumpled to the marble floor.

"What's wrong with me?" I whispered to no one in particular. Tears streamed down my cheeks.

The baby continued to kick as the sound of Luke's padding feet filled my ears. He appeared from around the corner. His large shoulders stretched against his T-shirt, and his golden eyes filled with concern when they happened upon me.

An aching sense of need filled me. *My mate.*

He rushed to my side. The movement was a blur since his powers kicked in. He was like Flint in that way, except his powers far outnumbered my adopted brother's.

"Love. What is it?" Luke's golden gaze flickered across my face. A deep growl filled his throat. "Did something happen? Are you hurt?"

The tears continued to pour down my cheeks. “Something’s wrong with me, Luke. Something’s really, really wrong.”

~ ~ ~

An hour later, I was on the examination table at Father’s home. He and Di had told us to come over after I called them.

I hated that I was putting everyone through such an ordeal. Father and Di had assessed me so much during my pregnancy. I knew they were starting to doubt my concerns. I could only call wolf so many times before people stopped listening. *No pun intended.* I swallowed a hysterical laugh that wanted to bubble out of me.

The ultrasound whirred in the background as Father glided the handheld wand over my abdomen. I stared at the screen as black-and-white images of my baby appeared.

“Here are the legs and arms.” He pointed at the screen. “And here, you can see the profile. All still human.”

Luke stood at my side, his energy tense and strong. His large hand held mine.

“But you say you’ve been feeling more irritable and are now having irrational thoughts?” Father turned off the ultrasound machine and handed me a towel to wipe the gel from my stomach.

Di stood behind him, a medical book open in front of her on one of the tables.

“Feeling things like that are normal during pregnancy.” Di glanced up from the book. Her dark hair bobbed against her jaw. “Most pregnant women feel overly emotional at some point during their pregnancy. It’s from the hormones.”

“But it’s not that . . . it’s like I have these urges. These instincts that are almost overwhelming at times. Thoughts overtake me, and I have these reactions I can barely control.”

Di snapped the book shut. Her dark gaze narrowed as her expression turned pensive. “What kind of instincts?”

“It’s like I want to hide my belly from everyone. I don’t want anyone looking at or noticing me. I almost lashed out at my coworker today, and she’s never been anything but sweet to me.” I frowned, my shoulders sinking. “It’s only around all of you that I don’t feel that way. Only around

our family do I *not* have these urges. And thankfully, the babies at work don't bother me. I only ever feel caring toward them." My brow puckered. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I lashed out at a child.

Father and Di shared a contemplative look as Father finished cleaning the ultrasound equipment. He and Di stepped out of the room. From their tapping footsteps, I knew they were moving several rooms away.

I turned up my hearing.

"Do you think it's worth looking into wolf behavior during pregnancy?" Di asked in hushed tones from down the hall. They'd moved clear to the center of the house, but even when they whispered, I could still hear them, though barely. "She's almost sounding territorial, and if she can only tolerate us that makes sense since we're her pack."

"I was thinking the same thing," Father replied. "Many of her behaviors and what she's experiencing could be explained by that. Female wolves are very protective of their young and have to rely on their pack to feed them while they're nursing and raising the pups. For many weeks, the mother often doesn't leave her den, and she relies solely on her pack to nourish her. It would explain why Jacinda isn't turning on us, but why she sees other adults as threats."

My cheeks flushed. *Wolf behavior?*

"I remember reading something like that from our animal biology textbooks when we were growing up." The sound of Di tapping her chin followed.

"But I'm not a wolf!" I practically screamed.

Luke tensed at my outburst.

Footsteps tapped down the hall. I turned my hearing back to normal just as Di and Father returned to the room. Both of them had the decency to look sheepish. Even though they'd taken precautions to avoid my overhearing, my genetically enhanced hearing was too good.

"We know you're not." Di rushed to my side and took my hand. The fact that she took my hand and rubbed it soothingly told me my reaction had been even more extreme than I'd meant it to be.

But my heart still raced as blood whooshed through my ears. *Wolf behavior? Really?*

"It's still worth looking into," Father said soothingly. Kindness exuded from his hazel eyes as he pushed his glasses up his nose. Since I'd pulled him from his home lab, he still wore a lab coat.

Guilt again nibbled at my conscience. Both Father and Di had been working when Luke called them an hour ago. And as they always did, they'd dropped everything to accommodate me.

"I'm sorry," I whispered before swinging my legs over the side of the exam table. "I'm so sorry that I keep taking your time up and acting like a crazy woman."

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Father and Di share a concerned look.

Luke massaged my shoulders. "Nobody thinks you're crazy," he said harshly before he growled. "Isn't that right?"

"Of course nobody thinks that," Father said adamantly.

"Luke's right," Di agreed. She hunkered down in front of me and clasped my hands with her thin tanned fingers. "But you *do* have lupine DNA in your bloodstream right now. It's possible it's affecting you. You could be exhibiting these urges and behaviors because of it."

Luke grumbled his agreement gently. "When I ran in the wild with the wolves, I observed alpha females in estrus and during their pregnancies. They often became more dominant and irritable. It wasn't unusual for them to snap at others. What you're experiencing is normal."

A hysterical laugh bubbled out of me. "For a wolf it's normal, but for *me*, it's not!"

Father frowned. "No, you're not a wolf, but your partner is part wolf, and the lupine DNA in your bloodstream also confirms that your baby is part wolf."

My gaze met his as my emotions went on another rollercoaster ride, then I burst into tears.

CHAPTER THREE

Luke took me home after my emotional encounter with Di and Father. Once we arrived at our condo, I crawled into bed. Tiredness radiated along every line of my body. My swollen belly wasn't helping. Movement was getting harder and harder as our baby grew and stretched.

Luke drew the blackout curtains after giving me a soothing massage. Sleep was just on the precipice when his words flowed to me from the living room as I lay in our dark bedroom.

"Yes, I definitely think you should come, Lena. She'd be happy to see you." He was on the phone, talking to my sister.

A smile ghosted my lips. *Lena. Sister.* The thought of seeing her brought a soothing feeling of peace. For once, tiredness gripped me in her dark embrace, and I fell into oblivion. I welcomed it. Needed it.

Even though I knew the dreams were coming.

~ ~ ~

Pain ripped through me. Horrible, awful, excruciating pain. My belly felt like it was being clawed open. Waves of agony rippled along my abdomen.

I opened my eyes to a dark room. Noise from the Denver streets filtered in from below, but they were nothing compared to my panting.

"Ahh!" The wail left my lips as another wave of sharp pain stabbed my abdomen. It wasn't a dream. It was *real*.

I gripped the edge of our bedframe tightly and pulled myself to a sitting position. A moan left my lips as I struggled to take breaths. "Luke!"

I squeezed my eyes shut as another stabbing wave needled my belly. "Ahh!"

Luke roused from a deep sleep slowly. His gaze was hooded when he opened his eyes. Sitting upright, his eyes flew wide open. "Jacinda? My love? What is it? Another dream?"

“No!” I gripped the headboard harder and gritted my teeth. “The baby, Luke! The baby’s coming!”

His eyes turned to saucers and began to glow as he threw the sheets off him. “Now? The baby’s coming now?”

Susannah appeared in our bedroom doorway, wearing pajamas. “What’s going on?” She rushed to my side as I rocked on the mattress.

Luke’s hands were scrambling along the bedside table. “My phone! Where’s my damned phone?”

Susannah joined him as I clutched my belly in agony. Another primal scream tore from my throat. It felt like someone was cutting me open from the inside out.

“Found it!” Susannah yelled, holding it up to Luke.

He snatched it from her hand before whizzing around the bed and kneeling in front of me. “Just hold on, my love. Hold on. I’ll call Conroy and Di.”

“Let me!” Susannah appeared on my other side, holding out her hand. Wild blue eyes met mine when I moaned again. She looked as terrified as I felt. “Help Jacinda, Luke. I have no idea what to do for her.”

Luke tossed her the phone before he picked me up and carried me across the room. His nostrils flared. It was only then I felt the dampness between my legs. The smell of blood and body fluids reached my nose.

I began mewling. “The baby’s coming. The baby’s coming.” I screamed again when another contraction ripped through my stomach. “But it’s too early, Luke! He can’t come now. It’s too early!”

“Shh, my love.” He kicked the bathroom door open and strode in, flicking the light on. His irises glowed when he took in the horrific scene that was my body.

Blood stained my nightclothes. Pale skin stared back at me in the mirror, my long blond locks hung damp from sweat, and my light-brown eyes were wide with panic. *I’m hemorrhaging.* Even though I knew nothing about medicine and giving birth, I knew losing so much blood wasn’t good.

“Luke?” I said weakly as another round of pain made me grip him hard enough to break skin.

Disheveled locks of tawny hair covered his head. Two days’ worth of stubble covered his cheeks. His massive shoulders, at least three feet wide, looked as tense and hard as bowling balls.

Worry clenched his jaw before he set me down on the sink's edge. I leaned my entire weight into him as he lifted the hem of my nightclothes. The world began to swim in darkness despite the harsh lights of the bathroom.

"Just hold on, my love. They're coming." His caramel-colored eyes flickered.

But I couldn't hold on. I opened my mouth to scream again as a new wave of pain swept through me, but only a pitiful moan came out before the world fell into darkness.

~ ~ ~

I woke to the sensation of hands on my abdomen. Hands everywhere. Voices came next, but they were muffled and faded in and out. I tried to open my eyes but couldn't. The entire world became sound and touch.

". . . stopped the contractions . . . we'll need to . . ."

A growl and sharp words. "She's still bleeding!"

"I know . . ." A soothing reply. ". . . taking her to . . ."

Someone lifted me, and the world disappeared again.

~ ~ ~

"Jacinda? Can you hear me?" The voice was worried. A hand touched me, running along my forehead. The fingertips were cool, the movements gentle. "Sister? Wake up."

Lena. My eyelids fluttered open.

Green eyes shimmering with tears met mine. My sister's hair was a wild mess of long red waves down her back. "Jace? You're awake!" Lena cradled my hand between both of hers before she brought it to her cheek and nuzzled it.

I blinked more and looked around. It seemed I was lying on a bed with Lena crouched at my side. Sunlight poured in through gauzy curtains, but it wasn't my room.

I recognized the large king-sized bed that I lay on along with the dark-wood furniture that adorned the room. *Father's guest room?*

"You had us really scared there for a few hours. Don't do that again." Lena's lips parted in a tentative smile.

Her words made last night come crashing back. My heart broke as all thoughts of my whereabouts vanished. “The baby?”

I bolted upright, my hands flying to my swollen stomach.

He’s still inside me. Relief rained down on me just as he kicked, but my heart still pounded from the thought that I’d lost him.

“But how is he? Is he doing okay?” I rubbed my hands over my belly. Even though he moved, it didn’t mean everything was fine. Maybe the event last night had damaged him, cut off oxygen, or done something to impair his development. My mind whirled with all that could have happened.

Lena gently pushed me back into the pillows. “He’s fine, Jacinda. I wouldn’t lie to you. Father and Di said everything’s okay now. You don’t need to worry.”

“But what happened?”

“You went into labor during the night and started bleeding. Di and Father had to give you medicine to stop the contractions. It’s too early for your little guy to come yet.”

Hearing my sister’s soothing words and firm conviction stilled my trembling hands. I took several deep breaths as the horrors of the night slowly washed into the background. I made a move to get up, but Lena stopped me.

“You can’t get out of bed. Father has placed you on bed rest. He said you’re too high risk to be up and moving.”

I eyed the bed I lay in. “So I was moved to Father’s house?”

Lena pulled my hand into hers again. “Yeah. Luke, Susannah, Di, and Father drove you here after Susannah called them in a panic. Once you were stabilized at your penthouse, they figured it was safest to have you here since Father’s medical wing is closer.”

“Where’s Luke?”

“Passed out on the couch in the living room. So is Susannah. They had quite a scare. In fact, we all did. Flint and I drove here as fast as we could. The twins and Mica did too.”

My heart fluttered. “So everyone’s here?”

“Yep. The whole fam came as soon as Susannah put the word out. Amber and Edgar are in the kitchen making breakfast for the gang as we speak.” That wasn’t surprising since Amber and Edgar lived here with Father.

Lena leaned closer. “Susannah’s call scared the life out of me. I wish I didn’t live in Boulder. I know it’s only an hour away, but it felt so far last night. Those of you that live in Denver are the lucky ones. Raven drove here as soon as Di left to go to your apartment, but the twins, Mica, Flint, and I are so far away. We sped here as fast as we could during the night.”

“Normally, it doesn’t feel that far.”

“You’re right. Normally, it doesn’t, but last night, it did.”

I settled back against the covers and ran my free hand over my stomach. “I’m glad everyone’s here, and I’m so happy you came.” Just having her nearby brought a soothing feeling inside me. Lena and I had always been close. She was my only blood relation in our unlikely family, and growing up, we’d been inseparable.

“Of course I came.”

The warm feeling in me grew, but it was more than that. A feeling of peace and security coated my insides at the thought of my entire family under the same roof. *My pack.* I cocked my head at that thought and remembered Di and Father’s whisperings about wolf behavior.

I’d never thought of my family as a pack, but in a sense, Di and Father were right. Having all of us under the same roof did make me feel better. Whether that was due to the lupine DNA swirling through my bloodstream or something else, it didn’t matter.

I was happy even though incredibly fatigued from all that had happened, but right now, the happiness trumped that.

Lena straightened the sheets over me. The way she hovered reminded me of all the times I’d taken care of her. Once again, our roles were reversed. “If I have any say in it, I’m not leaving your side until that little one comes out.”

My eyes widened in happiness. “Really? But what about your job?”

She shrugged nonchalantly. “I already called my boss. He’s not happy that I won’t make my shift today, but when I told him my sister almost died during the night and was gravely ill, he understood. I have the next month off from work for family emergency purposes.”

Even though I wasn’t due for another two months, the thought of having Lena around for at least half of that time was reassuring. “That makes me so happy. I’ve missed you.”

“I’ve missed you too.”

“And Flint? What’s he doing?”

“He’s with Di. She needed help cleaning up the medical room.”

My brow furrowed. “Was it that messy?”

Her smile faltered. “A bit of blood, but nothing that couldn’t be cleaned up.”

I nibbled on my lip as my stomach growled. The scents of breakfast cooking wafted into the room. From the smells, I had a feeling it was quite the feast.

A soft knock came on the door. Edgar peeked in. His shaved head was covered with a backward cap, and an apron was wrapped around his waist. “Amber and I made breakfast.” He stepped farther into the room. “We figured you’d be hungry.”

I nodded enthusiastically. “I’m starving. Thank you, Edgar.”

He dipped his head before exiting the room as quietly as he’d come. As always, Edgar drew as little attention to himself as possible. He’d always been that way. Never once had he transformed or used his powers. Of all of us, he was the most normal in that respect.

I was about to push the covers back when I remembered what Lena said about being on bed rest. *Two months in a bed.* I sighed at the thought of the mundaneness the future held.

“Don’t worry. I’ll get a plate for you.” Lena jogged out of the room, her loose dark-red curls trailing down her back.

A few minutes later, she returned with a tray of food and the rest of our family in tow.

Jet, Jasper, Mica, Amber, Edgar, Raven, Susannah, Flint, and Di all came barreling through the door. Lena led the way, carrying a tray of food. Luke hung back and leaned against the wall. He still looked unspeakably tired, but I also knew he would let my family say their hellos before he took his place at my side.

I gave him a knowing, thankful look. His caramel-colored eyes gleamed in response. Love shone in them before he crossed his massive arms over his chest and waited for everyone to finish greeting me.

“You’re awake!” Mica squealed. She raced to my side. In her free hand was a piece of half-eaten toast.

I laughed when a few crumbs fell on the bedspread.

The twins were right behind her. Jet and Jasper both looked tired, but relieved. With curly dark hair and blue eyes, they were hard to tell apart. Usually, only our immediate family could tell one from the other.

“You sure like to cause trouble.” Jet sat on the other side of the bed and kicked up his feet. The mattress sank in his direction. “I’m going to have words with that little bugger when he comes out. I missed out on my beauty rest last night.”

“I don’t think any amount of rest could make you beautiful,” Jasper retorted. He stood by his brother and crossed his arms.

Jet raised an eyebrow. “Your ugly mug looks identical to mine, bro, so I don’t know why you’d be knocking it.”

“Are they already at it?” Amber asked. The youngest in our family pushed past the brothers to sit on the bed’s edge. She reached for my hand. Worry filled her doe-like brown eyes, and her dark hair was in its usual pixie style. “How are you feeling?”

“Surprisingly, okay.” Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Luke relax more. He’d been through so much. Once again, I felt horrible about all I’d put him through.

“You sure know how to cause a party!” Mica said cheerfully before taking another bite of her toast. “It’s been nonstop excitement around here since about three this morning.”

I winced, but she just patted my hand before taking the tray that Lena still held.

“Here ya go.” Mica placed it in front of me. “Hope you’re hungry! And if you’re not, I’ll eat that bacon. Jet hogged most of it out there.”

“I have to or you’ll take it all, Mica.” Jet winked at me.

“Thank you,” I replied and picked up a fork. Scrambled eggs, bacon, sausage, ham, toast, and fruit filled the plate. It was easily twice as much as I would usually eat. My gaze fell on the sausage, and I speared a link.

“Luke said you’ve been craving meat lately.” Edgar pushed his hands in his pockets. “So Amber and I pulled everything we had that you may like ou’ of the freezer last night.” His strange Cockney accent had faded considerably since we’d met him, but a few words still came out every now and then.

“Mm.” Grease coated the link. Normally, that would have made my nose wrinkle, but Edgar was right. I’d been craving meat lately.

I glanced over at Di, Raven, and Flint. The only full-blooded siblings in our family stood side by side near the window. All of them were tall and lean, with olive skin and dark eyes. Well, when Raven wore his contacts, they all had dark eyes. Other times, like today, his irises blazed in orange

embers. Their hair colors varied, though. Di and Raven had midnight-black hair. Flint's was a chestnut brown. But despite those subtle differences, they had similar mannerisms, bone structure, and personalities. Those traits made it glaringly obvious they came from the same genetic stock.

"Did you manage to sleep?" Di asked.

I nodded and picked up a piece of bacon. I'd already finished the sausage. "Honestly, I don't remember much." My gaze fell on a speck of blood on Flint's pants, causing my heartbeat to quicken. "Thanks for . . . um . . . cleaning up the medical room."

Flint shrugged. "We're all here to help you. You know that."

Raven crossed one foot over the other. "Are you still hurting?"

I shook my head and picked up a piece of ham. "I'm feeling surprisingly fine, given what happened."

I could tell that Luke was getting antsy. He again fidgeted by the wall, and his eyes were beginning to glow.

I beckoned him closer and asked Di, "Where's Father?"

She crossed her arms. "He went into work to grab more supplies."

I guessed she meant medical supplies. Father's work would definitely have them. Since we'd settled in Colorado—in the open and out in public—following our battle with O'Brien Pharmaceuticals, Father had opened a business. He was building his own corporate pharmaceutical company, and most days, he was working.

"Do you know when—"

Father appeared in the doorway.

I smiled brightly. "Speak of the devil. I was just going to ask when you'd be home."

Father's wispy hair was mussed, and his hazel eyes were alight, as if he'd been hurrying to get back to us. "You're awake." His gaze softened, and relief crossed his features.

"And hungry. I've been polishing off the breakfast Edgar and Amber were kind enough to make."

He came to my side. "May I?" Father asked, his hands over my stomach.

I nodded and moved the food tray away. He felt along my belly, and his shoulders relaxed. "He's in a good position. Still head down. I'd like to do another ultrasound this morning just to assess things better."

“Of course.” My appetite left me at the reminder that my pregnancy was so complicated.

Lena whisked away the tray, giving me more room to move. “How do you want me to get there?” I asked Father.

In Father’s sprawling mansion, the medical unit was clear on the other end of the house.

“Luke?” Father said, eyeing him. “Would you carry her?”

Luke pulled the covers back.

My gaze fell on the unfamiliar ensemble I wore. I’d been changed at some point during the night. Loose-fitting cotton pants covered my lower half, and a plain shirt covered my top. Neither were designer apparel.

I guessed it was Di or Luke who had changed me. Father might have been involved in my obstetric care, but when it came to seeing me with my clothes off, only Di and Luke helped in that department. Despite our family being close, we weren’t *that* close.

Luke gently cupped his arms under my knees and around my back before lifting me from the bed. He didn’t struggle despite my long legs and huge belly. Like Flint, he possessed the strength of a dozen men.

“This way,” Father called over his shoulder. Our entire family parted so Luke could carry me from the room.

“Do you want privacy for this?” Amber gazed at me with worry as she nibbled her bottom lip.

“As long as none of you mind seeing a pregnant woman’s belly, you’re welcome to come along, but when I actually deliver, I’d prefer it if only Di, Lena, and Luke were in the room.”

Jet made a horrified face as Luke reached the doorway. “I’m guessing that’s fine by all of us.” Jet ran a hand through his hair. “As much as we want to meet the little troublemaker, I’m more than happy to miss his actual entrance into the world.”

I stifled a laugh. Even though we’d all grown up together, and even though most of us weren’t technically related, we all still felt like brothers and sisters. And having my brothers in the delivery room was definitely *not* part of my birth plan.

I gave him a cheeky smile. “The feeling’s mutual.”

“Thank goodness for that,” Jasper said as we all trailed down the hallway. “For a moment there, you had me worried.”

Lena patted his shoulder. “Don’t worry. You’re not invited.”

Mica laughed.

Father led the way through the house with me and Luke directly behind him. The rest of our family walked in our wakes.

We moved from wing to wing, passing large rooms filled with expensive furniture and beautiful artwork. Since leaving the Forbidden Hills, Father had returned to living as he'd grown up: huge houses, hired help, and expensive everything.

The extravagance wasn't necessary, but I heartily approved of it since I had a penchant for that lifestyle. Still, only Father, Edgar, and Amber occupied the huge home. It was a lot of space for three people.

Scents of breakfast filled the air when we passed the kitchen. The kitchen was my favorite room in the house. The six-burner stove, large granite island, and industrial-sized fridge would have made any executive chef feel envious.

"Here we are." Father stopped at the doorway to his home medical unit. The strong smell of antiseptic hung in the air.

My advanced hearing caught a few words whispered quietly from the back of the group.

". . . so clean now . . ."

". . .was covered in blood. Flint and Di cleaned it . . ."

I turned my hearing down. My hands shook when I thought of how close I'd come to dying or losing my baby.

"You can set her right here, Luke." Father waved a hand at the examination table.

Luke set me down as Father pulled the ultrasound machine closer. Di joined him. Together, as usual, they worked in perfect synchronization.

After smearing a large glob of ultrasound gel on my tummy, Father turned on the machine and placed the wand on my stomach. Black-and-white images appeared on the screen. My heart rate increased.

Everybody crowded around the table. Even though I didn't have Lena's powers, I still felt the energy in the room. Excitement, fear, and anticipation lingered on the faces of my family.

Nobody said a word as Father moved the wand. A second passed before the beginnings of a frown grew on Father's face. Another second passed. He moved the wand again. His frown deepened.

Di stepped closer to the machine and put her hands on her hips. Her brow furrowed before she gave Father a concerned look.

His jaw tightened before he nodded subtly at her.

“What is it?” I asked.

I stared at the screen, trying to see whatever they were seeing. And then slowly, the image came into view. Even I could tell what it was.

I gasped.

My baby, my perfect *human* baby, now had ears on the top of his head and a tail.

CHAPTER FOUR

"Am I seeing things?" I tried to sit up more on the table, but Luke gently pushed me down.

"Shh, my love. It doesn't mean it's anything to worry about. I can transform into a wolf. It only makes sense that our baby can too."

As usual, his soothing words helped slow my pounding heart. "Do you think that's what it is? Do you think he's just shifting in my belly but he'll be able to turn back into a human?"

Di and Father still studied the image, both frowning. "Father and I noticed a few subtle changes in your blood work last week, but this . . ."

"Is he still okay?" My voice rose. The rest of my family was uncharacteristically quiet.

"His heartbeat is steady, and his movements are normal," Father replied readily. "Yes. He's still fine."

"But he's a wolf now?" My fingers curled into my palms.

The image on the screen shifted. The blood drained from my face. "Did the ears just . . . move to a different position on his head?"

Di's eyebrows drew together as she peered closer at the screen.

Lena came to my free side and touched my shoulder. Beside Luke, Lena looked so tiny, barely coming to his collarbone. Her worried green eyes met mine.

Di's mouth dropped just as Father's gasp filled the room.

I jerked upright. A sharp pain in my abdomen followed, but thankfully, it abated. "What is it now?"

"But how . . ." Father moved the ultrasound wand back and forth over my swollen stomach.

Luke guided me down onto my back again so Father could continue working. Di brought a hand to her mouth as her eyes grew as wide as saucers.

"Is that what I think it is?" she asked.

"Yes." Father nodded. "It is."

“What are you seeing?” Luke growled. His grip on me tightened.

I grabbed his hand and held on as I waited for them to explain. The rest of our family was as quiet as a mouse. It seemed everybody was holding their breaths.

“There are two heartbeats now,” Father said quietly.

“*Two* heartbeats?” Luke repeated. “So our baby now has *two* hearts?”

Di shook her head. “No. No, that’s not it at all.” The smile on her face quickly became a grin. “Look here and look here. Do you see this?” She pointed to various spots on the screen. “There are now *two* heads and *two* sets of legs.”

“And two tails?” Jet joked from the back.

Nervous laughter erupted. I knew Jet was trying to defuse the tension, but I was still close to tears.

Biting my trembling lip, I said, “Tell me exactly what you’re seeing. I still don’t understand.”

Father continued to move the wand around my belly. The look of wonder on his face increased, then he turned to me, his eyes soft. “It appears that you’re now having twins.”

~ ~ ~

“I don’t understand how any of this is possible!” I was back in the guest room, once again on strict bed rest. After spending over two hours in his medical unit, Father and Di had confirmed the impossible.

Luke and I were having twins, as miraculous as that was.

“So my baby split into another being, and the second one is a wolf?” A headache brewed in the back of my mind. I didn’t know if I should be overjoyed or terrified.

“That appears to be what happened.” Di sat on one side of me, Lena on the other. Each of them held one of my hands.

Luke paced on the far side of the room. I could tell that he felt similar to how I did, scared and happy at the same time. Because if one thing was apparent—now more than ever—it was that nothing about my pregnancy was normal.

“But they’re *both* okay, right?” I was still close to tears. My emotions lay just below the surface, ready to explode at any second. I didn’t know how many more surprises I could take.

Di just nodded. “Yes. As far as we can tell, they’re both healthy.”

“See, sis? Nothing to worry about.” Lena brushed a long strand of red hair behind her ear.

“Do you think the labor contractions last night were due to our second baby appearing? That it wasn’t my body trying to give birth?”

Di tapped her chin. “You know, I was wondering the same thing. It would definitely explain the pain and blood loss you had.”

I lay back and looked at the ceiling. And to think that horrific waking I’d had during the night may not have been early labor. Instead, it could be explained by the emergence of a second fetus. *But how is that possible? And will there be more?* Logically, if a second baby could appear, then more could too. I gulped.

“So are they both boys?” I asked.

Di frowned. “I don’t know. We know your first baby is definitely a boy, but since we still don’t have a clear picture of the other . . . baby’s . . . genitals, we can’t confirm the gender.”

I frowned heavily. I knew what she really wanted to say was *wolf’s* genitals. Granted I wasn’t a medical wizard, but it seemed like our second baby would *have* to be a boy too even if he was a wolf. If our baby truly split into a second baby, the second baby had an identical set of genes as the first—therefore, he was a boy.

But logic *hadn’t* been a factor in any of my pregnancy. I bit my lip. *Unless the second baby was there all along, and we’re only just now seeing him . . . or her.*

“Is it possible this baby was always there?” I asked Di. “Maybe last night wasn’t about him splitting into a second baby. Maybe it was about the second baby having explosive growth?”

A curious expression grew on Di’s face. “That’s an interesting theory. I hadn’t thought of it, but now that you say that, I suppose that’s possible.”

Lena scooted closer to me, her small hand squeezing mine. “Honestly, Jacinda, at this point, anything’s possible. Perhaps the second baby was there all along, and Father and Di just didn’t see it. Either way, we now have two new babies to love!”

~ ~ ~

The next week went by agonizingly slowly. Even though my family tried valiantly to keep my thoughts occupied and my spirits up, being on bed rest made the days pass at a snail's pace.

Lena was at my side through it all. I took comfort in her cheerful chatter and wry jokes. She helped break up the time between ultrasounds and the endless minutes that refused to go faster. But the bed rest days were still boring. The only comfort I took was that the ultrasounds stayed consistent. Only two babies were growing—no litters for me.

"Your move, Jacinda." Lena sat across from me in the living room. Sunlight streamed in through the tall windows. Forest was visible at the edge of the property, and beyond that were the Rockies.

I moved my pawn. "Checkmate."

She rolled her eyes. "Again?"

I laughed as a passing cloud dimmed the summer sunshine.

It was nice to be out of my room for a change. Luke had carried me into the living room so Lena and I could enjoy a game of chess. Although, from Lena's grumbles and impatient chess moves, I guessed she wasn't happy that I'd beat her three times in a row.

I'd told Luke to go out for a run. He hadn't transformed in a while, and I knew he had wanted to work off some steam. Di and Father were in the house somewhere—probably the library or medical unit—but everyone else had retreated to their homes. After all, they still had jobs to attend to. Only Lena had stayed.

"I've had enough." Lena began to clear the board. "What do you want to do now? Watch a movie? Play a different game?"

"A movie might be—" A sharp stab of pain in my abdomen cut off my words. I brought my hand to my stomach. The babies had been strangely quiet all day, not kicking like they normally did.

"A movie sounds good!" Lena had already bounced up and was at the TV controls. She pulled up the streaming option.

Another round of pain shot through me, making my breath catch.

"What kind of movie? A drama? Comedy? Oooh, I know! That new one with—"

I screamed. A slice of pain, so sharp that tears sprang into my eyes, cut through my abdomen.

Lena whirled around and rushed to my side. "Jace? What's wrong?"

Another wave of agony rendered me speechless. I took short unsteady breaths before I finally managed in a low moan, “Go . . . find Di. Something’s . . . wrong!”

Lena’s bright-green eyes grew wide before she raced from the room. I was left alone in the expansive living room with its three full couches and stone fireplace. The grays, blues, and whites of the home décor were normally so soothing, but right then, I felt anything but soothed.

Another moan escaped me just as a rush of liquid gushed from between my legs.

“Oh God!” The fluid seeped through my loose pants and onto the couch. *I’ve ruined the furniture!*

Another round of undulating pain flung all thoughts of ruined furniture out of my mind.

“My love!” Luke appeared in the doorway. His hair was windblown and his eyes wild. In a blurred second, he was at my side, his large fingers pushing hair from my face. When he saw the rush of blood and body fluids on the couch, his eyes glowed as brightly as the sun.

“You’re here?” I grasped his hand tightly and held onto it. “Ow!” I clamped down on his fingers when another contraction exploded through my body.

“I saw it in a vision, but I was twenty miles away when it came. I ran back as fast as I could.” His worried gaze roamed over my body. He leaned closer to the fluid and sniffed. “It’s amniotic fluid. Your water broke. There’s no stopping your labor now.”

“Yes! They’re coming!” I screamed again just as Father, Di, and Lena careened around the corner and into the room.

Moaning, I grabbed hold of my belly. “Are they healthy, Luke? What did your vision show? Are they okay when they’re born?”

His eyebrows knitted together as his golden eyes glowed. “I don’t know. All I had was a vision of you in labor.”

I threw my head back and screamed as another round of painful waves cut through my stomach. “I need to get up! They’re coming!”

Father and Di crowded around me. They pushed Luke out of the way, or they tried to. He refused to budge.

“We need to start an IV!” Di’s dark gaze assessed me rapidly as Father said something about readying supplies before he hurried from the room.

A growl tore from Luke’s throat, and Lena wrung her hands while looking on helplessly.

“Luke, carry her to the medical wing. Now!” Di’s voice was calm but firm.

In one swoop, I was off the couch and flying down the hallway in Luke’s arms.

The sounds of footsteps filled the hall as Di and Lena ran several rooms behind us.

When we reached the medical room, Father waved at the examination table. “Put her here.”

Luke set me down but refused to let me go. I screamed as another sharp pain cut through my insides.

Di and Lena appeared beside me. Both were panting. Lena stepped back to stay out of the way while Di grabbed supplies to start an IV.

I gripped her hand. “There’s no time. They’re coming. Now!”

Wide-eyed, Di raced to the end of the examination table. I struggled up onto my elbows and started to push. Everything inside me told me to get the babies out.

“How can this happen so quickly?” Lena asked from the side of the room. “We were just playing chess a half an hour ago.”

“I don’t know.” Father’s grim reply said it all. “Most labors don’t happen spontaneously like this.” He continued readying supplies.

Luke supported my back as I sat up higher on the exam table.

“Okay, Jacinda,” Di said. “Scoot your bottom down here and push when your body tells you to.”

A scream ripped out of my throat as a powerful contraction rippled through my abdomen. I pushed as hard as I could and felt like I was being ripped open from the inside out. Murmurs came from my family in between the sharp contractions, but the entire world around me disappeared. All I felt was pain and the need to push. Everybody faded away as my body took over.

A part of me registered somebody rubbing my back and speaking encouragingly into my ear. Another part registered someone coaxing me to push and telling me to keep going.

But those voices faded into the background. I clenched my teeth as wave after wave of excruciating pain came at me like a tide. Minutes

passed, or maybe hours, or days. I had no idea. But just when I thought for sure I was going to die, a cry filled the room.

Panting, I tiredly opened my eyes. Di was covered up to her elbows in fluid as she held a squalling human baby in her arms.

Luke reached for the baby first. The umbilical cord was still attached to our newborn. With gentle movements, Luke brought him to my chest.

My eyes assessed him with wonder. He was perfect. Absolutely perfect.

“Ten fingers and ten toes and one hundred percent human.” Father stood near my shoulder while Di stayed ready for the second baby.

Luke hunkered down at my side, and our newborn’s steady cries subsided. His little mouth sucked on the skin that was exposed by my V-neck shirt. With a start, I realized I still wore half of my clothes, at least the upper half. At some point, though, someone had removed my pants.

But just as I was about to bring my son to my breast, another wave of pain shot through me.

“Hold him.” I handed him to Luke. Father swaddled him in a blanket during the exchange before Luke cradled him awkwardly to his chest.

Lena appeared at my side while Luke held our newborn. She gripped my hand tightly as tears shimmered in her eyes. “You did it, sister! One down. One to go. You can do this!”

I gripped her hand tightly as another contraction bore down on me. Panting and writhing, I pushed and screamed as the labor contractions came at me again in full force.

“That’s it. Keep pushing. You’re crowning again.” Di had crouched between my legs, but I knew something was wrong when her eyes widened in disbelief.

But I didn’t have time to think about it. The urge to push was too great. I screamed as another contraction forced the baby out.

The giant push made it feel like I was ripping apart, when all of a sudden, the pressure ceased.

Silence filled the room. Even our first baby didn’t make a sound. He was already asleep in Luke’s arms.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” I cried.

A yelp reached my ears. Mewling whimpers came next.

The strained smile on Di’s face grew as she slowly stood from between my legs.

My heart pounded when I saw our second baby wiggling in her hands. He—or she, I couldn’t be sure—was a squiggling, wet wolf puppy, just like the ultrasound had shown.

CHAPTER FIVE

"I gave birth to a wolf. I just gave birth to a wolf!" Hysteria rose up inside me as my eyes settled on the wet furry bundle in Di's hands. But as soon as that feeling came, it went. *He's still our baby.*

I held out my hands. Di handed over the squiggly, four-legged pup. Since his fur was wet, he was probably cold.

As soon as he was in my arms, I rubbed my hands over him again and again. Tiny blue eyes opened to peer up at me. I smiled down tenderly at him. *My baby's a wolf.*

But somehow, that didn't matter anymore. "Welcome to the world, my darling."

Lena, Di, and Father continued to stand there without saying a word. Shock was apparent on their faces.

Only Luke stepped forward to peer down at our second child. He hunkered at my side and grunted happily. "He looks healthy."

Despite the fierce love and protectiveness that stormed through me, I still realized that this posed a horrific dilemma for our family. If our second baby was a wolf, he might never fit into the human world. And more than that, we had no idea what our baby's mind was like. Perhaps his mind was that of a wolf that ran on instinct alone.

We didn't know, and it could be years before we did.

"Oh, Luke. What are we going to do?" Tears filled my eyes as the implications of everything set in.

"We'll figure it out." His voice was hoarse.

Luke handed me our firstborn after Di weighed him. The cherub-cheeked boy looked healthy and content despite being small.

"How big is he?"

"Six pounds and one ounce," Di replied. "At thirty-three weeks, that's a very good weight. He's breathing well, and his vitals are normal. It's almost like he's full-term."

“He does have Luke’s genes.” Lena smiled down at the babies. “Physically, Luke can heal faster than any of us and do things none of us can. Maybe their babies have enhanced abilities too—like growing fast.”

Father nodded. “That could explain the explosive growth of the second baby. Luke’s cells have the ability to multiply and regenerate at inhuman speed. Perhaps that’s what happened with the second fetus.”

Father and Di had discussed for hours how our second baby had emerged so suddenly. They concluded that it had to come from Luke’s altered genetics, just like I’d guessed. *Perhaps that’s why he’s a wolf. Or is our second baby a girl?*

Shifting our wolf baby, I glanced at Di.

“Can you tell me if our pup is a boy or a girl?” Before she could step in, Luke gently lifted our secondborn from my chest. The puppy wiggled and squirmed as Luke turned him over.

His eyes misted when he appraised the organs. “It’s a girl.”

Tears of joy, fear, and disbelief rose up inside me so strongly that I burst into tears. *I have a girl. I have a baby girl, but she’s a puppy.*

~ ~ ~

Luke transformed into a wolf an hour later. After Di and Lena helped clean me up, we debated the best way to care for my daughter.

Since she was a puppy, and possibly would never be human, we all agreed that she would find it more comforting to be with a similar species. Consequently, Luke had transformed to his wolf form to lick her clean and snuggle her against his warm body. She had readily curled up and slept in the crook of his legs.

So for the moment, Luke and I were back in the guest room where late-afternoon sun streamed through the windows. As I breastfed our firstborn, Luke cared for our second. She had already downed a bottle of formula that Lena had prepared. However, feeding her was going to be tricky. We didn’t know if she would take breast milk, formula, or if we needed to find a supplement of wolf milk. Luckily, considering how peacefully she slept, she seemed to be tolerating the formula.

Regardless of the dilemma we faced, she was beautiful. Her coat was a shiny gray. We didn’t know if she would eventually grow into something

similar to Luke's tawny coloring, or if she would have colors unique to her. But she was still healthy and small—but perfect.

"How are you feeling?" Lena tiptoed into the room.

I unlatched my son from my breast. He was already asleep. Tenderly tracing my finger along his cheek, I smiled down at him. "I feel wonderful if a bit sore."

Lena sat at my side. "Are you hungry? Everyone's here and is making dinner."

I wrapped my firstborn in a blanket and moved to stand from the bed. I wore loose cotton pants again and a nursing bra under my shirt. At least my shirt was a designer top, although my hair was in desperate need of a salon trip. "I'll put him in his crib. I can't believe how hungry I am."

"Everyone wants to meet them. The whole family arrived an hour ago."

I nodded. "After dinner. Let's let them sleep right now."

Lena stepped away to give me more room. "Have you thought of names yet?"

I nodded, cradling him in my arms. "We just decided an hour ago, but we'll wait until everyone's here. Then we'll announce it." My gaze drifted to Luke and our daughter. She looked so small curled in the crook of his leg.

Luke lifted his head and chuffed.

I eyed my partner. "Should we put her in the nursery too? Dinner's almost ready. Do you want to transform back?"

Luke stood, careful to not disturb our secondborn. She curled into a tighter ball but didn't wake.

"I'll carry her." Lena padded over to where our daughter lay. Gently lifting her, she cuddled her to her chest. A look of wonder crossed my sister's face. "She's so soft!"

"Isn't she beautiful?" I replied. Now that Luke had licked her clean, she was a ball of downy fur. Tears misted my eyes again as Luke trotted from the room to transform in private.

I held out my free arm to Lena. "May I?"

Lena's eyes widened. "Oh my gosh, of course!" She carefully handed my daughter over.

With both infants held against my breasts, I gazed down. Our daughter shifted in her sleep and wiggled closer to her brother. When her nose

brushed against his hand, he wiggled toward her too.

Lena's green eyes grew wide. "Did you see that?"

A crescent of a smile lifted my lips. "Yes! They want to touch. Do you think they recognize each other?"

"They must."

"Even though she only grew within the past two weeks?"

Lena placed her small hand on my forearm and squeezed. "She was always there, even though we didn't know it. They've been together the entire time. Of course, they recognize each other."

My heart burst with an emotion I couldn't describe just as Luke walked into our room. He wore jeans but was shirtless. My heart pattered. He'd always made my heart race, ever since that first moment I saw him, when we rescued him from O'Brien's warehouse.

A knowing glint filled his golden eyes before he went to the wardrobe and pulled out a T-shirt. Once fully dressed, he strode to my side and encircled my waist with his arm before pulling me close. Lena tiptoed out of the room as quietly as she'd come in.

"Look at them." He ran his finger along our daughter's back and our son's cheek. "You did amazing, my love."

I lifted my head as he leaned down. His lips brushed mine. I closed my eyes and inhaled his woodsy scent.

Growling, he tightened his arm around my waist as his tongue ran along my lower lip. I opened my mouth to him as he deepened the kiss.

He pulled back after a moment and rumbled his appreciation. His eyes glowed brighter as his arm locked possessively around my waist. "They're making quite a feast out there. Come, my love. Let's put these babes down so we can eat. Di tells me you'll not be getting much sleep now since you're breastfeeding our boy. You'll need to keep your strength up."

I bit back a smile at how he was already thinking ahead. All of this was as new to Luke as it was to me. While we'd tried to prepare for parenthood, we could only do so much. Since neither of us had grown up with other families, being around little ones was completely foreign to Luke. My job had prepared me a little, but caring for other people's children was still different from having our own, but I'd read dozens of books since discovering we were pregnant. And I figured instinct would tell me what to do.

“Come.” Luke guided me from the room. Next to our room was the nursery. Father’s home held several guest rooms that could easily accommodate our entire family, so we could all be together if we chose.

We’d redecorated the room after deciding to stay for a few weeks following the birth, but I stopped short in the room’s doorway.

“We only have one crib.” In all the chaos of the previous week, I’d completely forgotten that we’d only been planning for one baby.

“They’ll stay in it together. Look. They want to be together.”

I glanced down at our sleeping newborns. My breath caught in my throat. Our son’s hand was curled around our daughter’s paw, and she’d moved to rest her chin on his leg.

“They belong together,” Luke said gruffly.

I padded to the crib and set them down. Neither stirred except to shift closer to the other.

Luke lifted a blanket and covered them. Their heads, one canine and one human, peeked out from the top. The sight made fear rise up inside me again.

“What are we going to do? What if she’s never human?” My hand clutched my throat.

His hand tightened on my waist. His unspoken words said everything.

CHAPTER SIX

“Congratulations!” Jet’s voiced boomed in the kitchen when we entered it. “To the new mom and dad!” He lifted a glass. From its frothy contents, I guessed it was beer.

“Yeah! Congrats!” Mica ran up and gave me a hug. Her square teeth flashed in a wide smile.

“I hear they’re both healthy!” Amber raced up behind her, quickly followed by Susannah, Edgar, Jasper, and Raven.

Flint stood by Lena. The two of them joined everyone else around Luke and me. The large granite island spread out before us. Scents of something baking in the oven filled the room. Only Di and Father stood back as they let everyone else rush to our sides.

I was surrounded by warm hugs, congratulations, and everyone voicing their happiness. Despite my earlier concerns about what the future held, a warm feeling slid through my chest. Nobody had voiced disgust or unacceptance over our daughter’s wolf form.

“We hear you have a boy and girl.” Amber sidled up next to me.

I put my arm around her shoulders and squeezed. “Yes. One of each.”

“And one’s furry?” Jet’s lips lifted in an amused smirk. “She must take after her dad.”

Jasper laughed, and Mica soon joined in. My lips twitched in a genuine smile. The twins and Mica always had a knack for turning scary or tragic situations into something to laugh about.

“When do we get to see them?” Amber clapped her hands together.

Luke pulled me to his side. “After we eat. Jacinda needs to keep her strength up. That’s most important right now.”

“Are you hungry?” Di asked.

I nodded. “Starving.”

“Dinner’s almost ready.” Father stood at the stove. “I made your favorite, Jacinth.”

I grinned warmly. “Salmon?”

Father’s hazel eyes crinkled in the corners when he smiled. “Yes. Poached salmon with baby potatoes and asparagus.”

My stomach growled as he pulled the potatoes from the oven.

Jet made a face. “It’s a good thing you just gave birth. It’s the only way I’d sit down and eat fish.”

Di arched an eyebrow. “We have a few steaks on the grill.”

Jet breathed a sigh of relief. “Hallelujah.”

Luke clapped him on the back. “That was at my request. You’re not the only one who prefers meat.”

I wonder if our daughter will prefer meat too. I tried to brush off those concerns as I moved to the table.

“Lena and I will get the steaks.” Flint grabbed the serving platter and tongs from the counter. His chestnut hair had golden streaks through it, as it often did during the summer months. My sister followed him to the patio door that lined the large living area in the open design. Smoke rose from the grill outside.

Everyone else began to find seats at the table. I sat down tenderly on my chair. I was still sore, but someone had thought to put a cushion on the chair where I usually sat.

I glanced at Di and mouthed, *Thank you*.

She merely nodded subtly in return.

An hour later, dinner was done, and my eyes began to droop. Even though it was only eight in the evening, I could barely keep my eyes open.

“You should get some rest,” Father said as he began collecting the empty dinner plates while everyone else chipped in to clean up. Chairs squeaked against the floor as people stood.

Luke pulled my chair back to help me up. “Come, my love. The babes won’t let you sleep long.”

Just as the words left his mouth, a cry sounded from the nursery. To most of the others, the sound was faint, but my enhanced hearing immediately revved up.

A second sound reached my ears—a mewling sound that was of a different pitch. With a furrowed brow, I gripped Luke’s hand.

“Did you hear that?”

He frowned. “Yeah.”

Susannah came to my side. Similar to Luke and Edgar, she also carried additional abilities. “I heard it too. It almost sounds like—”

I ran from the room, a slice of pain filling my lower abdomen at the sudden movement. Placing a hand on my lower belly, I didn't slow.

Luke was at my side as pounding footsteps filled the hall behind us.

I raced into the nursery and to the crib. My eyes widened when I stared down into the crib.

"Oh my God . . ." I brought a hand to my mouth as Luke's breath sucked in.

The rest of our family piled into the room behind us. Everyone surrounded the crib as gasps and shocked expressions filled their faces.

"Jacinda!" Lena cried. "She . . . your daughter . . ."

Tears filled my eyes as I gazed down at the two newborns in the crib. Both were awake and peered up at us as they wiggled and squirmed. Our son still wore his onesie, but our daughter was naked.

Fur no longer covered her skin, and her little legs kicked, but her limbs were no longer that of a wolf pup.

They were human.

My eyes drank in the sight of her perfect little cheeks and ten fingers and toes. Beside her brother, she looked thinner and paler, but she still appeared healthy. "Oh, Luke! Look! She's human! She can transform!" Elation coursed through me.

Jet scratched his head and peered into the crib. "So you didn't give birth to a puppy?"

"She did!" Lena replied. My sister's long dark-red curls draped around her shoulders as she leaned over the crib.

"Our girl . . ." Luke's eyes glowed as he reached into the crib for our daughter. She cried again.

"She must be cold!" I crowded to his side as he brought her to his chest. With a deft movement, he ripped his shirt off. He managed to do it while holding her in his large palm before transferring her to his free hand.

She mewled again and shivered.

Luke brought her to his bare chest and wrapped her in his arms. Her distraught cries stopped as Luke's immense heat warmed her. Her little mouth soon began opening and closing. She latched onto his skin and began to suck.

"Have you thought of names?" Mica asked as everyone crowded closer.

“We have.” I eyed Luke. He nodded at me to continue. “Our son’s name is Conroy Luke Fielding, and we’ve named our daughter Emerald Galena Fielding, but we’ll call her Emma.”

Father’s hazel eyes misted. “You named him after me? And you’ve given both of them my last name, *and* you named your daughter similar to how I named all of you girls?”

I gripped his hand tightly. “Yes.”

Lena beamed. “That’s perfect. Those names are absolutely perfect! And you named her middle name after me!”

Flint put his arm around my sister and squeezed. His dark eyes twinkled. “They obviously have good taste.”

“Yeah, Jace. It seems really fitting.” Jet crossed his arms, his large biceps bulging as he smiled pleasantly.

“They’re beautiful babies.” Edgar dropped his hand into the crib. Little Conroy’s fist encircled the tip of Edgar’s finger.

Everyone else murmured their agreement. Raven even looked close to tears. His orange eyes swirled as brightly as embers.

Only Emma didn’t seem impressed. She howled and latched back on to Luke, sucking urgently on his chest as her fists balled and punched him.

“Ah . . .” Jasper commented. “I think she’s confused. Unless Luke has more powers that we’re unaware of, I’m pretty sure she can’t feed from him.”

Luke stepped closer to my side. “My love? She’s hungry.” Luke guided me to the chair. My hands shook when he handed me Emma. She howled again as I reached for the hem of my shirt. She was so perfect that I never wanted to look away.

“I think this is where we leave.” Jet cleared his throat and steered our family out of the room. Only Susannah and Lena remained after everyone else filed out.

Susannah came to my side as I lifted my shirt. “Do you mind if I stay?” She beamed down at Emma. “She’s so . . . perfect!”

“Yes, she is, and of course you can stay.” I brought Emma to my breast. They felt heavy and full. Already, they’d swelled to nearly double their usual size.

Emma readily latched on before sucking greedily.

“She’s also hungry!” Lena commented. My sister kneeled at my other side as Luke lifted little Conroy from the crib.

Our boy cried, a lungful of air filling his chest before he wailed loudly enough to wake the dead.

“Can I feed them both at the same time?” I asked worriedly. “Or does Conroy need to wait?”

Di appeared in the doorway and closed the door behind her. She strode to Luke’s side and held out her arms. “May I?”

After Luke gave her our son, Di brought Conroy to me and helped arrange the babies. “According to the textbooks I’ve read and the pictures I’ve studied, you can feed both at once,” Di explained. “There are a few positions to try. You’ll have to decide which one’s easiest.”

It took some finagling, but Di helped me latch both newborns on after propping a pillow beneath them. Both of my little angels sucked greedily. I sighed when the full feeling in my breasts finally began to subside.

Luke’s eyes glowed brighter as a contented growl came from his throat. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you more beautiful.”

Happiness filled me as I stared down at them. “Look at our little babies!” My earlier fears over Emma never being able to transform from her wolf form vanished.

“They’re as perfect as their mother.” Luke kneeled at my side. Susannah scooted over to give him room.

I trailed a finger along Conroy’s cheek. “He’s going to be as big as—” I gasped when sharp pain suddenly raced up from my nipple on Emma’s side.

She bit me!

My eyes widened in horror as our daughter began writhing and mewling in my arms. Hair sprouted from her arms and legs as her tiny body convulsed. Sharp cries filled the room—a mixture of human and animal.

Conroy continued suckling, none the wiser for what was happening right beside him.

Terror filled my chest at the sound of Emma’s bones snapping and muscles stretching. Needle-like tiny teeth elongated from her gums as a snout formed. A painful yelp emitted from her mouth. The sounds made my blood run cold.

“Luke!” I cried, but as soon as the words left my mouth, the transformation finished. Once again, a furry little bundle lay in my arms. Emma’s little wolf tongue poked out as she lapped at my breast. She was obviously still hungry, but as a wolf, I couldn’t feed her.

The room was silent as Di, Luke, Susannah, and Lena looked on.

Di swallowed and said shakily, “So the good news is that we know she can transform into a human, so she should be able to transform back.”

The second those words finished flowing from Di’s lips, Emma’s body began convulsing again.

I tightened my grip around her as bones snapped, muscles ripped, and cries of pain left her little mouth. I gripped my mate’s hand tightly. “Luke! What do we do?”

Luke’s golden eyes glowed brightly as worry swam in his gaze. He reached for Emma and held her gently to me when my grip loosened. It kept our daughter from falling to the floor as I struggled to hold both babies while little Conroy still fed.

As the hair receded from Emma’s skin and her little body finished changing for the second time, she was human once more. Not even two minutes had passed, and she’d transformed twice.

I’d seen Luke transform, but it hadn’t been bad. He would grunt and groan, but the pain seemed bearable. *Not like this.* The pitiful cries that had left Emma’s mouth caused tears to stream down my cheeks.

I sobbed in relief when my daughter’s sharp cries finally quieted. She panted at my breast, but instead of feeding eagerly as her brother still was, she shuddered and closed her eyes.

“She’s exhausted,” I whispered. “Is she okay?”

Closing her eyes, Emma cuddled into me. Within seconds, she was asleep.

“She . . . um.” Di cleared her throat before saying in a shaky voice, “She appears to be.”

“Did she really just transform twice? In less than a few minutes?” Susannah shook her head in disbelief, her long dark hair swaying. “Do you know how hard that is?”

I didn’t know how to respond, but Luke nodded. “That’s incredibly taxing. For me to shift that quickly would leave me weak, at least for a while.”

“Me too,” Susannah agreed.

More tears filled my eyes. They trailed silently down my skin.

Since Emma’s body felt cool, I pulled the blanket that had been lying across the chair and covered her.

Little Conroy unlatched from my breast and leaned back into the crook of my elbow. He fell asleep too, a drop of milk on his plump cheek. He smiled peacefully, unlike his sister, who'd fallen asleep from terror and exhaustion with an empty tummy.

What are we going to do? The reality of our situation welled up inside me. Our daughter could transform, but she couldn't control her transformations—and from her horrendous cries during the process, the transformations caused her unbearable pain.

We needed to help her.

But I didn't know how.

CHAPTER SEVEN

It soon became apparent that our daughter's transformations were entirely unpredictable and completely out of control.

"She still hasn't fed." I gripped Luke's hand tightly as we stared down at our sleeping children. We'd moved the crib into our bedroom so we could keep a closer eye on Emma. Six hours had passed since that horrendous moment when I'd held both babies in my arms while Emma transformed. She'd already transformed between human and wolf a dozen times since then. Each time, it had rendered her exhausted, and she'd immediately fallen asleep.

Nothing we'd tried stopped her changes. I'd asked Luke to try to communicate with her in wolf form, hoping that maybe in her animal form she would be able to understand things she couldn't as a human, but Luke had tried and failed. Even as a wolf, her mind was still too young, too immature, to understand anything other than basic survival needs.

I gripped the crib rail tighter, the smooth wood squeaking under my palm. The rest of the house was quiet and dark. Outside, the moon was full and the sky black. Everyone had stayed in Father's home, occupying the numerous guest rooms, but they'd all gone to sleep hours ago.

Waves of exhaustion rolled through me. It had to be close to two in the morning, but I still hadn't slept. I couldn't. My daughter was suffering, and she still hadn't fed properly.

I leaned against Luke's side, taking comfort in his firm embrace. "And the pain she feels when she transforms. Oh, Luke, it eats at my heart! What are we going to do?"

His arms locked around me as he ran a hand soothingly through my hair. "We'll try a bottle again next time she wakes. Perhaps you'll only be able to breastfeed Conroy, and that's okay. We'll just have to do whatever works."

"Just as long as she eats."

In the moonlight, our babies couldn't look more different. It was obvious that Conroy had received the majority of the nutrition in utero. He was chubby-cheeked with rosy skin, whereas Emma was thinner and paler. Perhaps her abrupt growth from embryo to fetus had taken an incredible amount of energy. That growth had obviously concentrated on forming her bones and muscles versus padding her with much-needed fat.

"Does she look thinner than she did a few hours ago?" I peered down at her in the dimly lit room.

Luke's chest rumbled when he replied, "I thought I was seeing things, but she does look smaller." He rubbed his cheeks, the sound of his palms running over his stubbly cheeks like sandpaper. "It takes an incredible amount of energy to transform. It's why I'm so hungry after I do it. Maybe it's making her lose weight."

"And she's already changed from wolf to human, and human to wolf . . . what? Over twelve times?"

"At least that."

Emma had done a transformation less than thirty minutes before, while she'd slept, but I swore she looked thinner than she had even two hours ago.

After the second change occurred, Di began writing them down and documenting the time in between each one, but she had gone to sleep two hours ago after I insisted she rest. Di had been awake as long as me.

Her notepad sat on the bedside table. Di had asked Luke to write down how often the changes were occurring, but I was pretty sure we'd forgotten to document one or two.

"Should we try to wake her again to feed her?" I whispered.

I loathed the idea of disturbing her, but her thin limbs made fear claw up my throat. If Luke said transforming required a tremendous amount of energy, she would need to feed more than a normal newborn.

"We can try." Luke picked Emma up and rubbed his fingers across her cheeks.

She didn't move, but her little chest rose and fell with each breath.

"Let me try." I took Emma from his arms and moved to the chair. Sitting, I lifted my shirt and brought her lips to a large, taut nipple. Once again, my breasts felt so full. I knew I had the milk her little body craved. She just needed to eat it. "Come on, my little darling." I rubbed my breast against her mouth.

“Open up, little Emma.” Luke kneeled at my side. He looked as tired as I felt, but I knew he wouldn’t sleep until I did, and I had no intention of sleeping until my daughter’s color improved.

Luke popped a finger into Emma’s mouth and gently pushed it open.

I guided my breast to her mouth, but Emma didn’t respond.

“Di said to put something cold against her if we needed to wake her to feed. I’ll grab an ice pack.” Luke disappeared from my side in a blurred move. Not even five seconds passed before he returned.

“Oh, Luke. That’s cruel!” I wailed as he brought the ice pack to her chest.

He covered my hand with his. “I know it will startle her, but she needs to eat, my love. Look.” He lifted her tiny limb.

My breath sucked in. The bones around her wrist poked out.

How did she get so thin so fast?

But I knew the answer. The transformations. Emma was nothing like a normal human baby.

My heart pounded when Luke placed the ice pack against Emma’s tiny body. She woke with a startled wail. Tears pooled in my eyes, but I quickly stuffed my breast into her mouth, hoping she would eat.

She latched on.

Joy burst inside me when she sucked readily. “Yes! That’s it, my beautiful girl. Drink, little one!”

Emma drank while I kneaded my skin to encourage the milk to flow. My heart rate slowed as her little throat swallowed.

I grinned. “She’s drinking!”

“She is.” Happiness radiated in Luke’s words, and a peaceful feeling slid through me as I reached for his hand.

Cradling Emma to my chest, I leaned down to croon to her.

A convulsion wracked her body.

My eyes widened in horror. “No!”

Her tiny cry filled the room when she pulled back from my breast, her mouth open in a silent wail. The sickening sound of her body transforming came next.

“No!” I cried again. “No! No!” I gripped Emma tighter as the agony of the change took over her body.

Emma wailed, her little limbs flailing as she succumbed, powerless, to the demands the transformation required.

Tears poured down my cheeks as my darling daughter once again became a wolf pup. Little whimpers emitted from Emma's mouth as she curled into a furry ball, as if cocooning herself could shield her from the pains of this world.

"Get the bottle!" I cried to Luke.

He raced from the room and returned shaking a bottle vigorously with the newly mixed formula. Dropping to his knees, he brought the bottle with the long nipple to Emma's tiny snout.

But already she was asleep.

Once again, we tried to coax her awake to eat, but even using the ice pack didn't work. Emma was completely exhausted, and no amount of effort on our part could provide the much-needed nutrition our little girl's body demanded.

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Emma transformed twenty-five times in the next twelve hours. Dark circles lined my eyes. I hadn't slept in thirty-six hours, yet I couldn't. Not when my daughter was dying before my very eyes.

"She needs to feed, Luke. She needs to feed," I repeated again and again as I rocked my tiny daughter in my arms.

Once again, she was human, but she'd become even thinner. Her ribs protruded, and her skin was so white, it resembled snow.

Only little Conroy was thriving. Luke would hold him to my breast to let him feed, but I was so delirious from lack of sleep, half the time I didn't even know he was there until he'd finished feeding and fell back asleep.

Di tried to coax me to rest too, but I refused.

"She's dying, Di. She'd dying, and we're not doing anything about it!" Only twenty-four hours had passed since I welcomed my babies into the world, but already, I was unfit to care for one.

I couldn't feed my daughter.

I couldn't control her transformations.

I couldn't stop her pain.

And with each minute that passed, my daughter's body cannibalized itself to provide her with the energy the changes demanded.

Hazy sunlight spilled into my bedroom. Di and Father stood a few feet away, discussing our options. Lena and Susannah hovered in the corner of

the room. Flint, Edgar, and Amber were making dinner in the kitchen while the twins, Mica, and Raven traveled to our condo to bring over more clothes and things that Luke and I had forgotten in our haste to reach Father's.

It was evening again. The sun was low in the sky. My family had brought me a plate of food to eat at lunch, but I couldn't touch it. *How can I eat when my daughter is starving?*

"She's going to die!" Tears rolled down my cheeks. My mouth felt so dry, and the heavy feeling in my breasts had lessened, most likely from dehydration. I knew I needed to drink. I needed to eat. I still had one healthy baby I needed to care for, but all I could do was stare at the darling girl in my arms, who felt much too light and looked much too sickly.

Luke paced the room. Fury emanated from his body. I knew he felt as hopeless as me, but whereas I cried time and time again, his energy turned to anger. I knew he hated that he couldn't care for me and our children.

Di chewed on her finger as a shrewd look covered her face. "We need to find a way to stop her transformations," she said, not for the first time. Dropping her hand, Di stepped closer to Emma. "If we can stop her transformations, and if she stays permanently as either a wolf or a human, she'll be able to feed. If she can feed, she should survive, but unfortunately, it's become obvious she's completely unable to control her transformations. I was hoping they'd slow down, but since they haven't, we need to intervene. If we don't, she'll die."

Di's pragmatic words made my throat tighten.

Lena pushed away from the wall and kneeled at my side. "Don't worry, sister. Please don't worry. We'll figure this out."

"But how do we stop them?" I asked. "She can't control them. We can't teach her how to control them since she's so young, and each minute that passes by, she grows weaker and weaker." I gripped my sister's hand tightly. "She'll be dead within a day or two. I'm sure of it! If she doesn't feed, she'll die!"

The worry and fear that something was wrong, the emotions I'd felt throughout my entire pregnancy, rose up inside me like a tidal wave. *This* was what my subconscious had been trying to warn me about all along—Emma's presence and the challenges her little body would face.

Lena squeezed my hand back, her expression solemn.

With a growl, Luke's pacing increased while Susannah stood near the corner, twisting her hands. The two of them could transform at will, but that

had been learned. Beside the two of them, Edgar could transform too, but he never had, not in the entire time I'd known him.

And before that, when they were all captive in O'Brien and their transformations had been seen as threats, they'd been forced to endure that horrible drug that suppressed their animal forms. That drug—

My mouth parted. *That drug . . .*

I bolted to a standing position with my daughter in my arms. She barely shifted from the sudden movement as I rushed to Father. "I know! I know what we can do!"

Father steadied me since I swayed on my feet. "What, Jacinth?"

I grabbed his forearm. "That drug they gave Luke, Susannah, and Edgar at O'Brien when they were held imprisoned in the warehouse! The drug that stopped them from transforming! That's the drug we need! If we give that to Emma, it will stop her from changing! We can control her transformations, and it will allow her to feed. Then she won't die!" My eyes darted between him and Di. "Will that work? Can you create that drug and give it to her?"

Di and Father shared a weighted look.

"What?" I demanded. "Can you or not?"

Lena stood as still as a statue. Even Luke had stopped pacing. His beautiful golden locks hung in greasy streaks to his shoulders. Neither of us had showered or changed. For the first time in my life, I didn't give a damn about how I looked.

"Answer her!" Luke advanced closer to our adopted father. "Can you make that drug? Can you save Emma?"

Father took a shaky breath. "No. I can't. I have no idea what chemical composition Marcus used for that drug."

Lena's shoulders fell. "And since we destroyed all evidence of his work when we killed him, we'll never know!"

Her quiet words said it all.

I stumbled back and collapsed onto the chair, cradling my tiny, weak baby to my chest. Sobs wracked my body in earnest.

She's going to die! My beautiful girl is going to die, and there's nothing I can do about it!

I brought her closer to my face and touched her to my cheek. Her thin skin felt so cool.

“Wait!” Di’s sharp tone broke the quiet. “Marcus may be dead, but there’s somebody else who may know how to manufacture that drug.”

My head snapped up as my delirious, foggy brain tried to understand what she was saying. “There is?”

Di’s dark eyes turned fearful, but she nodded nonetheless. “Yes. Albert Darlington is still alive. He may know how to manufacture that drug.”

My mind reeled with the implications. Albert Darlington was one of the three original scientists in Project Renatus. He, Marcus Christenson, and Father had been the founders of the project that had created us, and from what I knew of Albert, he was just as sick and twisted as Marcus had been.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Another twenty-four hours passed. That was how long it took for Father to get in contact with Albert and for Albert to return to Chicago. Apparently, the older scientist had been abroad, but when he heard *why* Father wanted to meet him, he'd readily agreed to fly home.

I didn't want to think about his eager acceptance of Father's request. And I especially didn't want to think about why Albert had insisted Luke, the babies, and I all accompany Father to Illinois. Initially, I'd asked Father to go alone and return with the drug, but Albert was having none of it. If we didn't accompany Father—Albert wouldn't help us.

I leaned back in my seat on the jet. I couldn't believe we were traveling to Chicago to plead with the man who had mercilessly studied us when we were children, but Di was right. Albert Darlington was our only hope if we wanted to save Emma.

Thankfully, Lena, Flint, and Di also joined us. It felt safer that way—safety in numbers.

Little Conroy slept peacefully in Luke's arms. I held Emma. I couldn't bear to let her go. She seemed to grow weaker and weaker with each minute that passed, and despite the unbearable fatigue that rolled through my body in sharp intermittent waves, I couldn't sleep.

"Has she eaten more?" Lena leaned across the aisle and touched my arm gently.

The plane dipped as clouds drifted by the window. Greg, our pilot, had begun our descent into Chicago.

"A little." I shrugged helplessly. Emma was currently in her wolf form. Even as a pup, her fur was dull and her eyes droopy. She'd lost even more weight in the past few hours, and her spine stood up in a ridge, like prominent beads on a necklace. "She drank a few sips from the bottle about two hours ago. That's all I've been able to coax into her today. She's just too tired from the transformations."

I lifted my little ball of fur and cuddled her to my cheek. She lay listlessly in my arms, her breaths shallow. It had been an hour since her last change, which gave her a small break, but I knew another one was due soon. According to Di, ninety-seven minutes was the longest Emma had gone between transformations since being born.

"She's going to be fine." Lena moved her hand to clasp mine. "Albert will give us the drug, and then Emma will stop transforming and start eating. She's going to be okay."

I gripped Lena's hand and stared into my sister's green eyes. My throat constricted. "But on what terms?"

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We landed in Chicago twenty minutes later. Hot humid air swirled around the jet as we descended the stairs to the tarmac. The summer sun shone brightly as the scent of jet fuel hung in the air. A large van with black-tinted windows waited for us. We wasted no time climbing aboard before speeding toward Albert's.

Driving along the interstates and highways surrounding the Windy City brought back horrible memories that I wanted to bury. It was here that we had rescued Luke, Edgar, and Susannah from O'Brien Pharmaceuticals. It was here that we had returned to Marcus's mansion and ended the tyranny that O'Brien had forced upon us our entire lives.

But now we were back. And once again, we were confronting somebody from our past—a person I never wanted to see again.

Father weaved in and out of traffic, driving much faster than he usually did.

Di turned from where she sat in the front seat to face us. "When we arrive at Albert's, Father will do the talking. He's still hoping we won't need to be involved. We're to stay in the van unless he signals for us to enter Albert's home. Does everybody understand?"

I cradled Emma to my chest. Since she was still in wolf form, a car seat wouldn't work. Only little Conroy was buckled up. "We'll stay in the van. Just please, Father. Make him help us."

"Yes. Please." Luke's voice was hoarse.

Father glanced at us in the rear-view mirror. He looked nearly as fatigued as Luke and I did. He had spent countless hours in his lab, poring

over old data as he searched for the drug that Marcus had created. But try as he might, Father hadn't been able to find it, and despite knowing he could probably create a similar drug eventually, at the moment, we didn't have time.

"I'll do my best." Father returned his attention to the road, a grim expression on his face.

~ ~ ~

We pulled up to Albert's estate thirty minutes later. Its structure was chillingly familiar. Between the solid walls that lined the perimeter, the swiveling security cameras, and the elaborate wrought iron gates that admitted vehicles, more memories surfaced of the time we had broken into Marcus's mansion. I shuddered.

"Was he hard to get in touch with?" Flint leaned forward in his seat beside my sister. Through his thin T-shirt, the muscles in his back were visible.

Father shook his head when the large gates opened soundlessly. "I've had Albert's contact information since . . ." He pulled the van forward. "Well, since I last spoke to him."

I knew Father was referring to that fateful day over two years ago, when Father had flown to Chicago to negotiate terms with Albert—a blackmail deal that guaranteed Albert would leave us alone.

Father drove down the narrow winding driveway. It was perfectly smooth blacktop and looked new. Large trees shaded the drive. The grounds were eerily pristine.

"Albert's also had my contact information since I reached out to him two years ago." Father drove the van up to a large stone mansion, which looked like something out of the English countryside. He shifted the van into park. "Albert has inquired a few times about all of you. However, I've never replied."

Di looked at him sharply. "You never told me that."

Father shrugged. "I didn't think it was important. He doesn't deserve to know anything about any of you."

The bitter twinge in Father's tone was something I rarely heard.

Father opened his door. "Excuse me. I'll return as quickly as possible. Hopefully, I won't need you to come inside with the children."

My heart pounded as Father slammed the door behind him and walked on stiff legs to the mansion's front door. I closed my eyes and prayed fervently that Albert would give us the drug without any of us having to see him again.

~ ~ ~

My eyes began to droop as we waited in the car. Father had left the engine running so the air-conditioning stayed on, but still, exhaustion wrapped itself around me like a lover's embrace.

"Just rest for a while, my love," Luke whispered into my ear.

Lena shifted from where she sat in the back. "This seat is really long. How about you come back here with Emma and lie down? Both of you can __"

"No!" I gasped when I felt the tremble in my arms.

Emma began to convulse and yipped painfully when the transformation took over.

Di reached for Emma and took her gently from my arms. She winced when the snapping sound of bones filled the cab. Tears filled my eyes as little Conroy let out a cry. Within seconds, the van was filled with painful yelps from our daughter and ear-piercing wails from our son. Chaos had broken out in the span of twenty seconds.

"Can you feed him?" Luke unbuckled Conroy as I automatically lifted my shirt.

Flint turned to look out the window. I knew he'd done it to respect my privacy, but at the moment, I didn't give a damn.

"Di?" I called. Conroy readily latched onto my breast, but my attention still stayed on my daughter.

"The transformation has finished." Di held up Emma from the front, but there were no cries.

My heart stopped. "Di? Is she okay? Why isn't she making any sounds?"

When Di didn't respond, the blood drained from my face. "Di?" I screamed.

"She's very weak." Di cradled my naked daughter to her chest. Against Di's black blouse, Emma looked snowy white. "I need you to try to feed her, Jacinda. Can you latch her on to your other breast? Her heart rate is

much too fast, and she's incredibly dehydrated. I don't think we have much time left. She's . . ."

I swallowed sharply. "She doesn't have much time left before she passes away? Is that what you were going to say?"

Luke's eyes flickered to golden as he emitted a powerful growl. Lena sat with wide eyes, her face pale. Even though Flint still looked out the window, I saw him swallow tightly.

Di gave the barest hint of a nod. "That's right. I don't think she has much time left."

Before I could think about the wisdom of my actions, I unlatched Conroy and handed him to Luke. Little Conroy let out a startled cry at his meal ending sooner than he wanted, but I couldn't let my daughter die. I flew to the front of the van, my movements clumsy in the cramped space, and grabbed Emma from Di.

"Jacinda? What are you doing?" Di's frantic call filled my ears as I unlocked the van's door.

I didn't reply as I flew out of the vehicle.

Cradling my daughter to my chest, I ran to the stairs and up to the front door. A huge wooden door with an elaborate metal lion's head in the center of it greeted me. I banged on it fiercely. "Open this door! Please! You have to help me!"

The air rustled around me. Luke appeared at my side. He still held Conroy, who was wailing loudly enough to wake the entire world.

"My love?" Luke's golden eyes were filled with panic.

"Albert has to help her, Luke! He has to!" Emma's tiny body was still cradled to my chest, but she hadn't made a sound. And worse than that, she felt like skin and bones.

The door opened abruptly just as Luke raised his fist to smash it down.

My breath caught in my throat as I gazed into eyes that I remembered —the cold, calculating blue eyes of Albert Darlington.

Albert stepped aside, but not before I saw a sickening smile lift his lips. "Jacinth, it's a pleasure to see you again. I hear that you require my assistance." Similar to Father, he was well-dressed. However, that was where the similarities ended. Where Father was warm and loving, the cold, detached emotion rolling off Albert was alien-like and clinical.

I hurried stiffly into the massive entryway. Marble flooring and ivory pillars adorned the circular foyer. A large and wide staircase off to the right

led to the second floor. Father stood only a few feet away, his face pale.

"You have to help us! You just have to!" Tears formed in my eyes. I didn't care that my voice sounded desperate or that my hair was in disarray. I probably looked at death's doorstep, but I didn't care about any of that. Even though my vision swam in and out of focus from lack of sleep and even though intermittent nausea had wracked my body for the last twelve hours, I didn't care.

I unfolded my tight embrace to show him my daughter. "She's close to death. Please help us."

Albert's eyes widened as he reached for my daughter. I was loath to let her go, especially when I saw the eager gleam in his eyes.

"Conroy tells me that she's inherited Luke's abilities."

A blanket appeared at my side. Lena lifted it to Albert. "Here. Cover her with this."

I gave my sister a brief, grateful smile. In my haste to leave the van, I'd completely forgotten to dress my own child.

Albert wrapped Emma's emaciated body in the blanket then felt for her pulse. "I believe you're correct, Conroy. She's close to death. Come. We don't have much time."

CHAPTER NINE

Albert led us through the large mansion, which felt like a vacant tomb.

"You'll have to excuse my not offering you refreshments. My staff is off as I wasn't expected back from Europe for another month."

None of us responded. My entire family followed behind me. I didn't register any of our surroundings. All I felt was Luke's arm around my waist and the whimpers that came from little Conroy. It seemed our son had accepted his fate and knew that another meal wasn't coming anytime soon.

But what my hearing was most in tune with was the terrifying quietness that came from my daughter. Not one cry. Only the faintest shallow breaths. Even her heartbeat sounded dim, not like the galloping sound that came from Luke's chest.

Albert stopped at a solid door near the back of the house. It was passcode protected. Off to the right, the expansive grounds were visible through large windows. Albert typed in a password and opened the door. A stairwell leading down appeared.

"This way."

He led us downward into a deep subterranean portion of the house. The farther we went, the colder it became. The stale air, hint of chemical scent, and concrete walls told me that Albert had also constructed a personal laboratory in his home, similar to Father's.

"I need to administer this drug immediately, but first I must weigh her. It's essential to titrate the correct dose. Too much, and it could kill her. Too little, and it won't stop the transformations." Albert's leather loafers tapped the hard floor as the chill in the air grew. At the bottom of the stairs was a short hallway. Off to the right, I saw a lab.

My enhanced hearing registered the quiet flow from the HVAC and hum from numerous machines when we stepped into the room.

A cold metal table was in the center, and Albert laid my daughter on it. I rushed forward to make sure the blanket shielded her from the cold metal surface. Luke shifted to my side, and together, we hovered over her.

She’s so white!

The rest of my family hung back, even Di. Only Father had moved forward to assist Albert.

After weighing Emma, Albert returned with a syringe. My stomach heaved. Susannah and Luke had described what the drug felt like when it had been administered to them during their time in O’Brien’s subterranean labs. They’d described it as a sick and oily feeling, swimming through their bloodstream. And now, I had willingly handed my daughter over to the mad-man who had helped create such a concoction.

“Conroy? Will you please hold the child? Given her state, we’ll need to do an intraosseous infusion.” Albert’s aloof gaze slid over my daughter.

Luke stiffened. My grip on him tightened. Little Conroy, as if picking up on my despair, began to wail in earnest.

Lena rushed forward and took him from Luke before stepping back to stand by Flint. Our son continued to cry.

Father and Albert gripped Emma’s tiny leg just below the knee.

She didn’t make a sound.

“We’ll need to begin a rehydration infusion as soon as this drug is administered.” Father cleared his throat. From the choked-up way in which he spoke, I knew he was as strongly affected as I was. “The next twelve hours will be crucial.”

Di appeared on my other side as Conroy’s wails subsided and whimpers came instead.

I closed my eyes as a sharp growl filled Luke’s chest. He’d been on edge ever since we entered the mansion. I could feel it in the tense way he stood and the fisted balls of his hands.

“Just save her!” he snarled.

Another moment passed.

“There. It’s done.” Father stepped back as Albert strung up IV tubing. “She’s been given the dose. Now, we’ll start fluids.”

Emma lay still, only the barest rise of her chest visible.

“We’ll hydrate her with a dextrose solution.” The old scientist stared down at my daughter with such a calculating gaze that I wanted to tear her off the table and cradle her far from his prying eyes. “As soon as she rouses enough to eat, you’ll need to feed her, Jacinth.”

I stepped to the table. Tears poured down my cheeks. “May I hold her?”

Albert cocked his head and raised an eyebrow. “Hold her?”

Father glared at him before placing a comforting hand on my shoulder. “Of course you can. Just don’t disturb the IV.”

With Father and Di’s help, I sat on a stool by the IV pole and cradled my daughter.

From the detached way in which Albert observed me, I felt like an animal at the zoo. I half expected him to pull out a clipboard and begin documenting my behavior. His interest was so different from Di’s and Father’s scientific curiosity, as if everyone around him were potential specimens for his more sinister interests.

The infusion continued to drip into Emma. Luke put his arm around me, and I leaned into him. Right now, I needed his warmth. It seeped into me like rays from the sun.

“She’s going to be fine,” Luke whispered gruffly in my ear.

“I hope so.” I tenderly ran my finger along Emma’s cheek. Her skin was still cool and pale, but at least her breathing was even.

Conroy cried again. My heart started at the sound.

Lena walked closer to my side. From the tense way she stood and how upset little Conroy was getting, it seemed everyone in the room was on edge. Albert’s hovering and sickly interest only made it worse.

Lena leaned down and whispered, “I think he’s hungry.” She eyed Albert before turning her back to him. “I already checked his diaper. It’s clean, and he doesn’t seem tired. Do you want me to mix up a bottle of formula? Di brought some along since we knew . . . well, things could be busy for you here.”

“No. I’ll feed him.” Another bout of nausea rolled through me at the lack of sleep. My eyes felt like lead as a throbbing headache brewed.

I carefully set Emma in Luke’s arms before Lena produced another blanket. “Di brought this one too. You know, in case you wanted privacy.” She nodded subtly toward Albert.

“Thank you.” My hand shook when I lifted my shirt. Already, my breasts felt like rocks. Poor Conroy had to be famished.

After arranging him while using the blanket to shield myself, I closed my eyes as Conroy fed. Wave after wave of tiredness pounded me like the surf pounds the shore.

“Remarkable, Conroy. Absolutely remarkable.”

Albert's cold tone had my eyes snapping open. He stood only a yard away, stroking his chin while he watched me. Even though I was covered from his prying eyes, I still felt exposed.

"They seem like normal humans," he continued. "I never would have guessed, if I ever saw them on the street, that they possess inhuman traits."

Father bristled. "They *are* humans." He inched closer to us and laid a comforting hand on my shoulder.

"Are they?" Albert raised an eyebrow.

Silence followed that statement, but the tension in the room was so thick, I could have swum in it. I turned down my hearing. Already, the sounds of the room were getting to me since they were amplified in the quiet.

"She needs to rest." Father turned to Albert and placed his hands on his hips. "Neither Jacinth nor Luke have slept since their children were born, and as you can see, they're exhausted."

Albert bowed in a mocking way. "Of course. I have several guest rooms. They're welcome to use them."

Even though I wanted nothing more than to disappear into a deep dreamless sleep, the thought of letting my guard down in this man's home made my skin crawl. But Father was right. Luke and I needed to rest, Emma needed to recover, and the only man who could provide us with the drug that would keep my child alive was the very man I wanted to run away from.

We had no choice but to stay.

~ ~ ~

An impressive canopied bed stood in the guest room. Large windows faced west. The fading summer sun hung low near the horizon, bathing the expansive grounds in a reddish-gold light.

"I don't think I can sleep in this man's house." I stood stiffly in the middle of the room, little Conroy dozing in my arms. He'd fallen asleep as soon as he'd finished feeding, and I was loath to let him go. I'd barely spent time with him or focused on him since his birth. All of my attention had been on Emma.

My daughter currently lay in a makeshift crib Lena, Di, and Flint had erected in the corner of the room. Her IV pole loomed over her. Already,

her color had improved.

"You need to sleep." Luke's deep voice brought a comforting rush of warmth to my skin. He stepped closer and guided me to the bed. "You can't keep up your strength to feed these babes if you never sleep."

He was right. I knew he was. I could feel the energy draining from me. I'd also lost weight. Considering the stress of the twins' birth, Emma's problems, Conroy's demands for milk, and my lack of eating—I was a wreck.

I lifted a hand to my hair and tried to smile. "I must be a sight."

Luke pulled my hand from my tangled locks. "You're beautiful."

Lena stepped away from the crib and nodded toward Flint and Di. "We'll watch over the babies so you and Luke can sleep."

Flint stood by the closed and locked bedroom door, his arms crossed. From the alert and tense way he stood, I knew he would guard us with his life.

"And we'll feed Emma when she wakes enough to eat." Di held up the bottles of breast milk that I'd pumped after feeding Conroy.

I'd completely forgotten we'd even bought a breast pump a few weeks ago, but Di hadn't, and she'd packed it along with a change of clothes for me, the babies, and Luke.

"I'll also monitor Emma closely to make sure she doesn't have an adverse reaction to the drug," Di added. "Don't worry. We'll keep her safe."

Tears formed in my eyes. "What would I do without all of you?"

Lena rushed to my side and wrapped me in a hug. Her long curls tickled my face. "We've already discussed it. The three of us will take care of the babies, and we'll all stay awake. Flint won't let Albert near you. Don't worry. We got this."

Di nodded. "Lena's right. We'll take care of everything. Just rest while you can. The babies won't let you sleep long."

I finally nodded.

Downstairs Father and Albert were still talking. I had no idea what discussion they had fallen into, but after Albert had shown us to the guest room and had helped arrange Emma's medical supplies—all the while making my skin crawl—he'd disappeared from the room after Father's insistence that they "hash out the details."

I knew those details were similar to the terms they'd come to two years ago. I could only hope Father would be able to negotiate in our favor once

more.

“What if Albert uses those drugs on us?” Despite fog swirling through my mind, that thought still prevailed. “What if he poisons us while we’re here? Like Marcus did? Then we’ll be defenseless against him.” My sister had been subjected to that drug when Marcus kidnapped her. There was no stopping Albert from doing something similar.

Luke snarled, making Conroy jump. Luckily, our baby fell right back asleep. “If he touches you or the babes, I’ll kill him.” Luke’s eyes glowed brighter.

Di fiddled with something on Emma’s IV pole. “I’ve already looked into that and have shared my concerns with Father.” She stopped fussing with Emma’s supplies and faced me squarely. “Keep in mind that Albert doesn’t have hired goons, not like Marcus did, and Father said he never has. When it comes down to numbers, there are six of us and only one of him. He won’t overpower us.”

“And I won’t let him in this room.” Flint’s dark eyes glittered. “You can rest easy.”

“Come, my love.” Luke again steered me to the bed. “Rest.”

The vicious tremor that had wracked his body at the mention of Albert had disappeared. Now, all I saw was concern in his gaze—concern for me and our babies.

“Okay. Maybe for a little while.” I handed Conroy over to Di. Thankfully, since I’d pumped my breasts until they were dry, I knew I wouldn’t have to worry about waking to feed him anytime soon. With any luck, I could get a few hours of rest. “Are you sure she’s okay?” I glanced worriedly at Emma.

“She’ll be fine. She’s already stirred a few times, and her vitals are good. She’s getting stronger.” Di pulled back the covers on the bed. “Now, go to sleep.”

~ ~ ~

“Jacinda? Can you wake up?”

I woke with a start, the heavy feeling of sleep still in my mind. “Di?” I bolted upright in bed, but it wasn’t my bed. I felt around the sheets. *Where am I?*

“Jacinda.” Di said the word quietly from where she stood at the bed’s edge. In her arms were two bundled infants. “I’m sorry to wake you, but I’m out of milk. They’re hungry, and you’ll need to feed them if you want to keep your milk supply up.”

Lena stood at Di’s side. She held up several empty bottles apologetically. “These two like to eat.”

My mouth parted when two tiny sets of eyes peered out from the blankets. *Emma!* I reached for her. She was awake and balling a fist to her mouth.

Her body felt tiny, as light as a bird, but her skin had a pink hue. I tentatively pulled back the blanket that was wrapped around her. My breath caught. While Emma was still thin, her ribs weren’t poking out quite as much. “She’s okay?”

“Yes. She’s going to be fine.” Lena put her hands on her hips as a content smile lifted her lips. “And with how well she’s eating now, I bet in a few days, she’ll be plump like her brother.”

Lena laughed when little Conroy yawned loudly. Already, he had a double chin.

“She’s grown strong very quickly.” Flint’s deep voice rolled from across the room. He sat on the floor, his back propped against the closed door. Like Di and Lena, he looked tired, but he was still awake. “She obviously takes after her dad.” He winked.

Luke still slumbered on the bed. From the soft snores fluttering up from his pillow, he didn’t seem likely to wake anytime soon. Dim light spilled into the room from the windows.

“What time is it?” I asked. “How long did I sleep?”

“Nine hours. It’s just after five in the morning.” Lena yawned. “Taking care of babies is tiring.”

I smiled warmly at her. “I can take over now. Thank you for letting me sleep.” I reached for Conroy too. Di readily handed him over.

Conroy was as wide awake as Emma, and from the way he wiggled, I knew he was on the edge of a meltdown. His little cheeks puffed red, and he opened his mouth to wail. My gaze drifted between my two newborns.

“They’re so perfect.”

“They are.” Di crossed her arms. “Now, remember Emma’s due for another dose of her drug this afternoon. So far, it’s working. She hasn’t

transformed, which means she'll need to take a daily dose to keep the transformations at bay." She bit her lip and frowned.

I knew something was up, but I couldn't bring myself to ask. All I wanted to do was hold my children. I turned my attention back to Emma just as Conroy bawled. Despite the lingering feeling of sleep still heavy in my mind, I felt more alert by the second.

With Di's help, I arranged both of them. My shoulders relaxed even more when Emma ate just as greedily as Conroy.

"So we're in the clear now? She'll be fine?" I looked up at Di. Dark circles lined her eyes. I reached for her hand and squeezed.

Di's brow furrowed again in that way that made my throat clench. "She will be as long as Albert hands over the chemical composition for his drug, but so far, he's refusing to."

~ ~ ~

The seven of us stood in Albert's living room. It was near evening. It was hard to believe we'd already been at Albert's house for twenty-four hours. In that time, Emma hadn't transformed. Not once. The drug was working.

"The man must have a death wish," Lena said quietly as Luke paced the room.

I had a feeling she was right. Luke looked ready to kill, yet Albert showed no signs of backing down.

Both Conroy and Emma currently slept on a blanket on the couch. Little Conroy had his arm around Emma, and she snuggled into him, but I didn't know how long their slumber would last. She'd been feeding twice as often as her brother, as if catching up for the missed meals in her first few days of life.

"She needs the next dose within the hour." I turned to Albert. "It's the only way to keep her alive."

Luke stopped pacing. His golden eyes glowed. I imagined the panic in my voice had caused it. With a sharp snarl, he advanced on Albert.

If Luke had done that to any other person, I would have bet money they would retreat in fear, but Albert merely smiled.

Albert clasped his hands behind his back. "What an impressive specimen you are, Luke. It's too bad Marcus isn't here to see it."

Veins bulged from Luke's neck. Flint intervened, thankfully. From the looks of it, Luke was seconds away from murdering the old scientist.

After Flint pushed Luke back a few feet, my mate raked his hand through his hair multiple times, and his irises kept flickering, but he no longer looked intent on attacking Albert.

"Don't forget about the information I have on you, Albert." Father stood near the coffee table. His cheeks were ruddy as anger pulsed from him. As he had two years ago, he resorted to blackmail. "Now, please, give us the chemical composition for that drug."

"I heard you the first time." Albert's frosty gaze slid across the room. "However, I have no intention of doing that. I think we all know I hold the trump card. Blackmail won't work anymore."

I leveled him with a cold stare. "What is it that you want?"

"I have a proposition for you." Albert smiled. It looked as natural as a grinning shark. "I shall continue providing adequate doses of the drugs for little Emma, *if* you let me study her and her brother in return."

"Absolutely not!" I stepped in front of my babies. "You will never touch them!"

"Who said anything about touching them?" Albert held up his hands in mock surrender. "I would be content to observe them, for now. I'd like to be a part of their lives. It's something that I should have always been a part of anyway. After all, if it weren't for me, none of you would be standing here."

"That's a lie, and you know it, old friend." The way Father said *old friend* made it apparent he did not view Albert as a friend at all. "If it weren't for me, everyone in this room would be dead. If I had left them in your hands, they would have died long ago under your malicious and relentless treatment."

"Speaking of that, how's Raven?" Albert's lofty indifference and unflappable demeanor made ice flow through my chest. "I hear that he is living with all of you. I'm not sure how Marcus would have felt about that. I—"

"Can we purchase the drug from you?" I asked. My heart pounded in my chest. "How much do you want?" I'd give him every penny in my trust fund even if that meant a new life devoid of designer clothes and spa days.

Albert cocked his head. "I have no need for money. I told you, I will provide as many doses as required as long as you let me study your babies."

“It will never happen!” Luke shouted. “Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t kill you right now.”

Albert laughed. The sound made my skin crawl. It reminded me of hyenas about to go in for the kill. “That’s easy. If you kill me, your child will die.”

Silence followed that statement.

Luke’s chest heaved while my heart felt ready to explode.

“What is it that you want to study?” I asked.

“You can’t be serious!” Luke whirled in my direction.

I held up my hand.

Albert smiled. “I knew sooner or later, you’d come around. Now, shall we discuss business?”

As much as it sickened me, I knew we had no choice.

CHAPTER TEN

We flew back to Colorado the next day. The dawn sun peeked over the horizon as our private jet climbed into the sky. The beautiful scenery didn't stop the bile from rising in my throat at the thought of what the future held.

Albert's terms required us to return to Chicago in one month. The malicious scientist wanted to spend three days with my children to document their development and growth. In return, he'd given us thirty doses of the medication—enough to keep Emma alive for another month.

And while I knew Albert's observations wouldn't harm them, I also knew as time passed, Albert would demand more than just observing. Thinking about the possibilities, I shuddered.

The only comfort I took was in the possibility of Di and Father manufacturing the identical drug in Father's home lab, but even I knew drug creation took time. It could be months or years before they figured out the chemical formula and production requirements. And until they recreated the drug, we were at Albert's mercy. Literally. My child's life was in his hands.

I nibbled my fingernail as we settled into a cruising altitude. It was the first time I'd paid attention to my nails in days. The paint was chipped, and I was in sore need of a manicure. *A week ago, that would have sent me running to the salon.*

The plane dipped intermittently as we flew. Beside me, anger rolled off Luke in steady waves. I didn't imagine his rage would lessen anytime soon.

Both Emma and little Conroy dozed in their car seats. We'd buckled their seats to the jet's recliners to counter the turbulence.

My lips curved into a smile at the pink tinge in Emma's cheeks. She'd eaten around the clock since she awoke after the first dose of the drug. She was finally safe.

For now.

My shoulders sank, and my smile disappeared. "What are we going to do? We can't rely on Albert forever." Just the thought of his cold, baleful

stare made my stomach tighten.

“We could use force.” Luke’s chest rumbled with a low growl. He placed a large hand on my thigh and added, “If only you’d all let me do that, I could have made him talk.”

I shuddered at the thought of violence, and I was pretty sure Father would have done the same if he heard Luke’s request, but since Father sat with Greg in the cockpit, he was none the wiser to Luke’s wishes.

Di raised an eyebrow from where she sat across the aisle. “We’ll figure a way out of this—without force.” She tapped a finger to her chin. “And remember, with enough time, Father and I can figure out the drug’s chemical composition. It’s just a matter of Albert continuing to help us until then.”

“Or until Emma learns how to control her transformations.” Lena turned around in her seat from the row ahead of us.

I bit back a nervous smile. Apparently, everyone was listening to our conversation.

Flint stood from his seat and also turned around. His chestnut hair was mussed, but his gaze was alert. I never would have guessed he’d spent the night awake, watching over us. “How long did it take you to control your transformations, Luke?”

Luke cocked his head. “I must have been around ten or eleven before I gained full control. But I wasn’t given the drug that altered my DNA to be part lupine until I was six or seven. I wasn’t like Emma. I wasn’t born with this ability, and I never transformed so young.” He scratched his chin. “For a long time, I couldn’t control my transformations. I think it took years before I could stop them.”

Di frowned. “So unless Father and I figure it out, Albert will be in our lives for the next decade, and that’s only if he chooses to continue helping us.”

My mouth parted. *Ten years?* The blood drained from my face.

~ ~ ~

We landed an hour later. Di helped me arrange the babies in the car. I leaned down and kissed the top of Emma’s fluffy head. Like her brother, she had wispy strands of blond hair.

“Are we all set?” Flint sat in the driver’s seat of the large SUV.

Lena sat in the front passenger side while Father, Di, Luke, the babies, and I occupied the back.

“Yeah. Let’s go.” I ran a shaky hand through my hair. “I’ve never wanted so desperately to be home.”

Luke grabbed my hand and squeezed.

When we finally reached Father’s massive mansion in the mountains, my eyes widened at the vehicles lining the driveway.

“Everyone’s still here?” I perked up in my seat just as little Conroy stirred. I gently placed the tip of my finger in his mouth to suck. He readily clamped down on it and tried to nurse. I knew it wouldn’t hold him off for long, but I hoped I would be able to greet my brothers and sisters before I had to nurse the babies again.

Jet’s Mustang was still parked in the drive along with Raven’s sleek Mercedes. When Flint pulled up beside them, my eyes alighted on a car I didn’t recognize.

“Whose vehicle is that?” I leaned closer to the window and turned up my hearing. In the house, I could make out the varying tones and pitches of our family, but there was a female voice that didn’t belong to any of our family members.

Lena ducked her head from the front seat. “It’s Grace’s car. I hope it’s okay that my best friend is here. I know I should’ve asked you, but I completely forgot before we boarded the jet. And I told her the other day the babies were born, and she wanted to meet them. Is that okay?”

I pinched Lena’s shoulder playfully. “Of course it is, you silly goose. You know I love Grace as much as you do.” I cocked my head. “But she sounds different than she normally does. Is she okay?”

A confused look sprouted on Lena’s face. “She does? I wonder why that is. I mean, I think she’s okay. If she isn’t, she never told me.”

I tuned in to Grace’s voice again. Her pitch sounded a little higher than I remembered, and she kept giggling. A smile grew on my lips when I heard the next voice. Raven’s. From his frequent throat clearing and nervous chuckles, I had a fairly good idea what was going on.

I nudged Luke. “I have a feeling a few interesting things are happening inside right now.”

He narrowed his gaze and tilted his head. When he wore that expression, I knew he’d also turned up his hearing. While his hearing wasn’t as astute as mine, it came pretty close.

“Is Raven laughing?” His eyes glowed in amusement.

“It seems so.”

“But he hardly ever laughs.” Luke grabbed the car seats while I opened the door. With one swift movement, he was out of the van with both of our babies dangling from his massive forearm.

“What are you two talking about?” Di placed her hands on her hips as Lena, Father, and Flint unpacked the bags from the back.

“Just Lena’s friend Grace. Remember her?” I arched an eyebrow.

Di nodded. “Of course. She’s the only normal human who knows about us.”

“That’s the one.” I sidled closer to Di. “And just so you know, I think your other brother is smitten with her.”

Di’s eyes grew wide. “Raven? Smitten with someone?”

Her surprised expression mirrored mine. Raven hadn’t dated anybody since he’d joined our family following Lena’s imprisonment in Marcus’s mansion. We all knew that he felt self-conscious about his unique eyes and ability. It didn’t help that he had grown up isolated and had never dated anyone, but from the conversation I was hearing inside Father’s home, it seemed someone had finally piqued his interest.

“Come on!” Lena called over her shoulder as she jogged to the front of the house with a diaper bag in hand. “Let’s tell everyone the good news!”

We found everybody, including Raven and Grace, in the living room. When we appeared in the large arched doorway, Susannah and Mica jumped to their feet.

“You’re back!” Mica rushed to my side and squeezed me in a hug before eagerly rushing to Luke’s side to hover over the twins. “Are they really okay?” Her short brown hair swung around her shoulders before she tucked it behind an ear.

“We thought it was too good to be true.” Susannah’s bright-blue eyes shone with happiness.

I dropped my purse at my feet. “How did you all know?” Neither Luke nor I had called or texted anyone. Our attention had been solely on the babies, but I was glad someone had.

“That would be me.” Flint shoved his hands in his pockets. His lips lifted in a smile. “Everybody wanted to know what was going on, and I figured you’d like to see the fam. Of course, these two”—he nodded toward

the infant twins—“are hard to resist, so I probably couldn’t have kept them away with a ten-foot pole.”

Jet snorted. “Please. Like a pole would stop us.”

Jasper laughed, and Lena joined in.

Only Raven and Grace hung back. I bit my lip to stop the cheeky smile that wanted to come. Raven kept eyeing Grace, and when Raven wasn’t looking, she eyed him.

At least we didn’t have to worry about hiding anything with Grace since Lena had told her best friend about our abilities. When Lena had first revealed to us that she’d told Grace about our powers, Di and Father had been irate. But as the weeks had gone by, we’d come to learn that Lena’s judgment had been sound. Grace had been over a few times since learning of our powers, and she’d never judged us or said a peep to anyone. Of course, she’d been around a few times before that, but during those times, we’d always been careful to keep our abilities in check. We didn’t bother anymore. Our secret was safe with her.

Hence, Raven’s eyes were missing their contacts. His amber irises swirled and glowed brighter than normal, which meant only one thing. He was feeling a heightened emotion. I nudged Jet’s side. “Looks like somebody’s got it bad.”

Jet snickered. “I was thinking the same thing. It’s good to have you back, by the way.” He put his arm around my shoulders and squeezed. “I’ve missed my partner in crime when it comes to teasing these people.”

I laughed softly. Growing up, Jet and I had loved teasing Lena. But it was all in good fun. Anytime Jet took it too far, I gently reined him in. And now, it seemed that Jet had found his latest family member to torment. Poor Raven. I wonder if he knew what he had coming.

“So what happened?” Amber asked. “Flint told us that Albert gave Emma the drug and she hasn’t transformed since, so does that mean everything’s fine now?”

Amber stood by the babies with Edgar. Both admired the tiny twins. Mica had settled by Emma’s car seat. I knew she was itching to hold her.

“Well . . .” My heart pounded as the memory of what our future held returned. Kneeling, I unbuckled their seatbelts and lifted Emma from her car seat. I gently placed her in Mica’s arms.

Mica grinned and fingered Emma’s little cheek.

“We have enough of Albert’s drug for a month.” The light mood that had been filling my chest grew heavier. “So for now, we’re safe, but once a month is up, all bets are off.”

~ ~ ~

Everybody stayed for lunch. Since it was summertime, all of us were on break from school, but we still had our jobs. Luckily, my daycare position had willingly given me twelve weeks off. However, now that I had the twins, I didn’t plan to return. I couldn’t. Given how unique Emma and Conroy were, I couldn’t enroll them in the daycare where I worked—or anywhere else for that matter. It was too risky. None of us knew what abilities little Conroy and Emma would develop as they grew, and if a new emerging ability appeared abruptly while they were in public, it could be a disaster. There were still so many unknowns in our future.

“Can you pass the salt?” Amber asked.

Hearing that question snapped me back to the present. The clinking and clanging of silverware on plates and dishes being passed around followed. Delicious scents from the lunch Jet, Jasper, and Mica had cooked floated through the air. All fourteen seats around the large dining table were occupied.

“This is bloody good!” Edgar dug into the Mediterranean meal. He spooned another large bite into his mouth.

Across from where I sat were Lena and Flint. Grace sat by Lena. However, her attention was not on my sister.

I knew I wasn’t the only one noticing the sparks flying between Raven and Grace. Jet kept winking at me and nodding in their direction.

If Grace wasn’t blushing, she was giggling, and if Raven wasn’t running his hands through his hair, he was giving Lena’s best friend side-eyes. The possibilities for teasing them were endless.

But my attention still stayed focused on my newborns—the teasing would have to wait. I kept my hearing at a medium volume so I would hear anything that came from the nursery.

Lifting a forkful of salad to my mouth, I cocked my head when a strange sound reached my ears. I turned up my hearing and did my best to tune out the voices around the table.

The sound came again. It sounded like scratching. *It's probably nothing. Maybe a tree branch against the window.* Sounds bombarded me so frequently that, at times, it was hard to decipher what was what.

I resumed eating and joined in the conversation, but ten minutes later, I heard another strange sound. It sounded like a helicopter taking off from nearby. *But none of the neighbors have helicopters.* I set my utensils down and cocked my head. "Do you hear that, Luke?"

He raised his eyebrows and swallowed half of his gyros in one bite. "Hear what?"

I turned my hearing on full power. The blood whooshed through my ears. Around me, everyone's heartbeats increased a thousand-fold. I concentrated on fine-tuning the sounds. That helicopter sound grew louder, but something else did too . . . a faint baby's cry.

My heart stopped as I bolted to a stand. "My babies!"

The chair toppled over behind me as I pushed away from the table. I was already running down the hall before everyone else scrambled to follow.

My heart pounded, and it felt like my lungs would explode from the adrenaline rush, then a blur of movement passed me. From the scent, I knew it was Luke.

A second later, I heard his roar.

"What is it?" I yelled. I careened around the corner to the nursery. Inside the baby's room, it was dark. We'd pulled the blackout curtains to limit the summertime sun.

Luke stood over the baby's crib. My stomach plummeted when I saw his hands gripping the crib so tightly that the sound of splintering wood followed.

"Where are they?" I raced to his side and nearly collapsed when I saw the crib was empty.

It was only then I felt it. The feel of air caressing my cheeks. The window to the room was open. The curtains billowed in the early-afternoon breeze, a hint of sun coming through the heaving blackout curtains when they rose.

The window was open. It hadn't been open when we'd put them to bed. My jaw dropped.

That was the scratching sound I heard earlier! Someone was prying the window open before they climbed in through it and took my babies!

“No!” I turned my hearing up more and concentrated on the helicopter. Already, it was growing faint.

A crushing vise constricted my chest. I gasped for air. My entire family surrounded me. I heard all of their pounding heartbeats and ragged breaths. Shouts and words flowed through the air, assaulting me in their intensity. But only one thought pummeled my mind.

Someone took my babies, and now, they’re gone.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

"It has to be Albert!" Mica fumed from where she stood by the door.

Lena nodded. "He's the only one that knows about them, and he's the only one that would want to take them. You heard what he said in Chicago. He wants to study them!"

"Study them?" Jet cocked his head as a disgusted expression formed on his face. "Human experiments again?"

"Experiment on *babies?"* Grace made an appalled face and raked a hand through her long blond hair.

"But why now?" Jasper eyebrows drew together. "Why take them now when he could have taken them in Chicago when you were in his house?"

"Because we guarded them too closely," Flint replied darkly. "We were expecting him to do something, so we stayed on high alert. The bastard was just biding his time, waiting until our guard dropped, and what better place to do that than in our own home right after we got home? We thought we had a month of safety."

Amber brought a hand to her mouth as a horrified squeak escaped her.

"Luke, I need you to scent the window." Di stood by the window pane. Sunlight poured into the room since she'd opened the curtains. I was vaguely aware of her assessing the situation with Raven and Flint at her side, but I couldn't join her. Everything inside me had stopped. It felt like my chest would explode from the bone-crushing panic that tightened around my lungs.

Susannah appeared at my side and laid a hand on my shoulder. "Don't worry. We'll find them. We'll find both of them!"

I gripped her hand tightly as Amber stood at my other side. "But how?" Amber asked. "What if he takes them somewhere that we can't find them?" Her pert mouth tightened in worry.

"It's him!" Luke snarled.

My head snapped toward the window, where Luke's body was visibly shaking as his hands clenched into tight fists. Veins protruded from his neck

as he sniffed along the windowsill. “I can scent Albert here.”

“My babies!” A wail rose up in my throat. “He can’t take them—he just can’t!”

“Luke, Susannah, Lena, Flint, Jet, and Jasper—come with me!” Di strode toward the door. Amazingly, she had kept her calm. Everybody else around me either stood with open mouths or shook in anger, except for Father. He was already on the phone calling Greg, our pilot.

“We’re leaving right now,” Di instructed.

“I’m coming too. You’re not leaving me behind!” I yelled.

Di stopped in the doorway. She had almost left but turned. “Jacinda, let us handle this. You’re in no shape to join us.”

I stood on shaky legs with Susannah and Amber supporting me. “There’s no way I’m *not* following the man who took my children!” Steel rang through my tone. “I’m coming!”

~ ~ ~

The largest vehicle we had could seat ten, and ten of us crammed into it: Father, Di, Flint, Susannah, Jet, Jasper, Lena, Luke, Edgar, and me. Surprisingly, Edgar had insisted he join us. Normally, he avoided all confrontation, but I was too sick with worry to pay him much attention. I just wanted my babies back, and the thought of what might be done to them made me physically ill.

Luckily for us, our pilot hadn’t left the city yet to return to his Florida home. That meant the jet was ready and waiting. We just had to reach it.

And then we can find my children.

Tears shimmered in my eyes as I grasped Luke’s hand tightly. It had been one roller-coaster after another since little Conroy and Emma had entered the world. *Why can’t we just have a normal life like everyone else?*

But I knew the answer to that question. We weren’t normal. We hadn’t been in more years than I could remember. Ever since O’Brien kidnapped us for their experiments and changed us into altered humans, our lives had never been normal.

A breeze rolled in through Di’s open window. Her mouth was set in a grim line as she drove. She weaved between cars on the interstate, her driving meticulous.

Turning in her middle seat, Lena asked the question I'd been wondering all along. "But how are we going to find them?" Her bright-green eyes shimmered with worry.

"I can still feel them." A muscle ticked in Luke's jaw as his eyes glowed. He tapped his head, which we all knew referred to his intrinsic tracking ability. "I can feel that they're traveling west, but they're moving fast. We need to hurry."

"West?" Father swiveled in his front passenger seat to face us. "Not east? Not back to Chicago?"

"No. They're going west."

"Susannah?" Father shifted his gaze to her. "Can you confirm that?"

Susannah bit her lip. "My connection to them isn't as strong as Luke's, since I haven't been around them much, but yes, from what I can tell, they're flying west."

I cast a worried glance Father's way. "Why west?"

Jet cleared his throat from the back. "And, more importantly, how fast are they moving? Won't you eventually lose them?"

Luke gritted his teeth.

I swallowed tightly. We all knew Luke and Susannah's tracking abilities had limits. Once someone ventured too far, Luke and Susannah wouldn't know any better than I did where they were.

I clamped my lips tightly together as a mewling sound rose in my chest. Already, my breasts ached. I could only imagine how hungry my babies were. *Please don't let him hurt them!*

"Di, have you been able to see anything in your visions?" Father asked.

She swung the large SUV into the airport's parking lot. In the distance, near the private hangars, our jet was visible. "Nothing specific. I had a flash of a vision. We were traveling in the jet and landing on the West Coast. I haven't seen anything beyond that."

She stomped on the gas and sped toward the plane.

I continued to wring my hands as the twins began speaking telepathically. Their silent conversation was obvious from the fleeting expressions that crossed their faces. Beside them, Edgar sat ramrod straight. Tension was evident in his shoulders and sweaty brow. I still didn't know why he'd insisted on joining us, but I welcomed any support he could give.

As if sensing how desperate I was feeling, Lena reached from her seat and squeezed my hand. “We’ll find them, sis. We will! And when I see Albert Darlington, I’m going to blast him with an energy ball so big, he’ll fly to the moon.”

I squeezed her back as a snarl erupted from Luke. “Not if I get my hands on him first,” he said in a deadly quiet voice. “If I do, he’s all mine.”

~ ~ ~

The entire flight was agony. Thoughts pummeled my mind like an unrelenting boxer. All I could think about was my babies crying and wanting to be fed and comforted. From what I’d seen of Albert, and from what I remembered of him when I’d been a child at his mercy, the man didn’t provide any comfort—only cruelty.

“We’re getting closer.” Luke straightened in his seat and gripped the armrests.

“He’s right!” Susannah uncrossed her slim legs. “I can feel them more too!”

“Is Portland still our destination?” Greg called from the cockpit.

Di’s latest vision had shown us confronting Albert in Oregon, but visions weren’t guarantees, merely projections of what a potential future could be.

“Yes. It’s still Portland.” Susannah closed her eyes and fingered her temples. “He’s moving slower now . . . I think. Luke? What do you feel?”

“He’s definitely moving slower. He’s in a vehicle,” Luke confirmed.

I brought a hand to my throat. “Can you see them? Are my babies okay?”

Susannah shook her head. “I can’t tell.”

I gripped Luke’s forearm, and his muscles tightened. “Luke? What’s he doing to our babies?”

He shook his head stiffly and growled. “I don’t know. All I know is that they’re traveling in a vehicle now. They’re not flying anymore.”

“I think he’s—” The jet suddenly plummeted, cutting off Edgar’s words.

I screamed.

“Sorry, folks!” Greg called from the front. “I can’t skirt the thunderstorm we’re approaching if you want to reach Portland in the

quickest time. Buckle up and hang on!”

My body lurched in my seat and my stomach heaved when another rough jostling shook the plane. We bounced in the sky like a yo-yo.

“Jacinda?” Luke looked at me worriedly. “Are you all right, my love?”

“I’ve never done well with motion.” I barely managed the words. The cabin dimmed as we flew headfirst into the storm. Lightning flashed outside my window.

“Do we make it to Portland?” Jasper’s voice was joking but strained. He laughed hollowly when the jet plunged again in a sickening dance with Mother Nature.

“We . . . land!” Di’s eyes were tightly closed as if she were concentrating deeply. I knew she was having visions. “But this turbulence won’t lessen. Stay buckled!”

“Jacinda?” Edgar’s quiet voice called, but I felt so sick, I couldn’t turn.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Susannah place a hand on his forearm and shake her head. He closed his mouth in a tight line.

~ ~ ~

What felt like an eternity passed before we landed in Portland. When we finally did, rain splattered the jet’s windows.

Hands shaking, I asked Luke, “Where are they?”

He frowned, his jaw tense. “They’re still moving. I think . . . toward the coast. They’re at least thirty minutes ahead of us.”

“Jacinda?” Edgar leaned forward in his seat as the jet taxied on the tarmac. “I might be able to—”

“Let’s get moving!” Di stood as the plane came to a halt.

Everyone jumped up. I turned to ask Edgar what he was going to say, but Luke gripped my hand and whisked me from my seat.

The ten of us jogged toward the steps single file as Greg stood at the front of the plane. The older pilot had been with us since we were kids. In a way, he was like an adopted uncle.

“You’ll find ’em.” He squeezed my shoulder when I passed.

“Thank you, Greg.”

And then we were out the door and rushing into two awaiting cars. Di went to the driver’s door of one, Flint to the other.

“Jacinda, you sit here.” Lena and Luke bustled me to the open back door of the first car. Soft rain landed on my cheeks and wet my hair. I barely noticed. *Albert’s taking my babies to the coast, but why?*

Di, Luke, Lena, and Father joined me.

Jet, Jasper, Edgar, and Susannah climbed into the vehicle parked behind ours. Flint already sat buckled in the driver’s seat.

The second Lena closed her door in the front, Di gunned the engine.

“Where are we going?” I grabbed Luke’s hand. He sat on one side of me while Lena sat on the other. Father was in the front with Di.

“Wherever this tells us to go.” Luke tapped the side of his head.

All I could manage was a stiff nod. Lena shifted closer and placed a comforting hand on my arm. At her feet lay the diaper bag with two full bottles of milk poking out the side, along with formula. Once again, Di had thought quickly on her feet. To relieve the unbearable pressure in my breasts, I’d pumped milk on the plane. Now, I just needed to find my babies so they could drink it.

“I think I’m going to be sick.” I leaned over and took deep gulping breaths. “What’s he doing to them?”

Lena rubbed my back. “We’ll get there soon, sister. Just hold tight.”

Over my head, I felt the weighted glance Luke and Lena shared, as if their unspoken communication had actual mass and hung between them.

Just as I managed to sit upright again, Father turned, a frown on his face. “I think I might know where he’s going.”

My eyes widened. “You do?”

The grim expression grew on Father’s face. “There’s been talk in the genetic community about a scientist building a remote lab on an island off the Oregon coast. And considering where Albert is headed, I believe that scientist may be him.”

He’s taking my babies to a private island with a newly constructed lab! It was the only coherent thought I could manage. Horrifying images came next: my tiny infants subjected to merciless testing by a scientist who had no conscience or moral compass.

The nausea in my stomach increased.

I should have been surprised, even appalled by what Father had revealed, but I’d grown so used to the mad scientific undertakings that occurred beneath the civilized veil of society that all I could do was picture my babies subjected to that very cruelty.

“We never should have gone to him!” My words came out in a wail. “Now that Albert knows about them, we’ll never be free of him!”

“Emma would have died without that drug.” Di looked at me in the rearview mirror. Sympathy glimmered in her irises, but something else did too—resolve. “We needed to contact Albert to keep her alive, but now, it’s a matter of keeping him away.”

Vivid emerald trees flashed by the window in a blur as Di sped toward the coast. We’d entered the forests west of Portland. The trees’ bright-green colors reminded me of the name we’d chosen for our daughter. Emerald. *Oh, please, let her and Conroy be all right!*

Forty-five minutes later, the scent of salty ocean water drifted in through Lena’s window.

“We’re close. Really close!” Luke leaned forward in his seat and closed his eyes. He inhaled sharply before exhaling. He did it again before his eyes flashed open. “A mile or two that way. We’re almost there.”

He pointed down the scenic highway that threaded along the coast. Even though I’d never been to Oregon, I didn’t pay attention to the scenery as Di stomped on the gas pedal. Only one thought permeated my mind: *Find my babies! Find them before it’s too late!*

CHAPTER TWELVE

"We should stop and convene with the others." Di stopped at the driveway, where Luke said our children had been taken. Just across the coastal highway lay the beach. The Pacific shimmered in the afternoon sun.

The driveway's smooth blacktop snaked into the forested hills. I could only assume the driveway led to a house, but the home wasn't visible.

At my side, Luke was like a pressure cooker about to explode. Tension strummed off him in steady waves.

"He parked up there." Luke pointed toward the driveway. "But now they're—" His head swung toward the ocean. "There!"

Just off shore, a boat was visible as it crashed through the growing surf.

"They're on that boat?" I asked.

"Yes." Luke's tone was clipped. He sounded as sick as I felt.

"How the hell are we going to get to that boat?" Lena asked.

My stomach sank. *How indeed?* We didn't have a boat to follow them. We didn't have a helicopter to fly over them. Our only option was to swim, yet we had no idea how far they were going. And despite Luke and Flint being strong enough to swim for miles in a strong ocean current, even they weren't immune to the frigid waters off the Oregon coast.

With each second that passed, the boat grew farther and farther away. *I may never see my babies again!*

Slamming car doors sounded behind us. The twins, Susannah, Edgar, and Flint appeared outside my window, but my attention was focused inward. I was numb. Completely numb. Even the tears had stopped. *We'll never get to them.*

That thought was too horrific to bear.

A fine misty rain fell outside. Cool wind whistled through Lena's cracked window. The gray clouds and gloomy weather matched exactly how I felt inside. Cold and empty.

"Jacinda!" Edgar tapped on the window.

I turned my face to gaze up at him.

A pleading expression was in his eyes. Dampness covered his ebony skin and shaved head. A part of me knew I should open the door and tell him to cover himself, but my limbs had turned to concrete. I couldn't move, let alone reply. The numbness had paralyzed my tongue.

"It will be okay." Lena grabbed my hand and nodded toward everyone outside the window. "Come on. We need to figure out what to do from here."

She opened the door and pulled me with her.

As soon as I stood outside the car, Edgar grabbed my hand, but my gaze stayed on the boat that was disappearing from sight. *My babies* . . .

"Jacinda!"

Edgar's yell finally permeated the fog in my mind. I looked at him blankly. Around us, my family was arguing about the best way to rescue my children, but their words sounded weird, as if everyone were talking under water.

I didn't want to hear their words anyway. Nothing they were saying was comforting. It would require hours before we had the resources to follow Albert out to sea.

"I can stop him!" Edgar's shout made me jump.

The conversation around me stopped. Time stood still. Even the cars that passed us on the highway lessened.

"What did you say?" Luke took a step toward Edgar. "You can stop him?"

Edgar ran a shaky hand over his head. "I was . . . I mean, I tried to . . ."

"Dude, just spit it out!" Jet clapped his back.

Edgar took a deep, shaky breath. "I tried to tell you earlier, Jacinda! I can stop Albert. I have the power to . . ." He took another breath. "Control minds."

Lena's eyebrows shot up her forehead. So did Di's.

"Come again?" Jet said.

"It's one of the powers I have." Edgar looked down and shuffled his feet. "It was the third ability they gave me. I was the only one who survived that drug."

"You can control minds?" Lena stepped closer to Edgar and put a hand on his shoulder. "But why didn't you tell us . . ." She shook her head. "It

doesn’t matter now. What matters is rescuing Emma and Conroy. Can you get them back?”

Edgar nodded. Sweat beaded on his forehead as shallow breaths puffed audibly from his chest. “You all know I don’t like using my powers. I usually never do, but this time . . .” He raised his eyes to me. “I’ll do it for you and Luke. I’ll do it for your babies.”

I rushed forward and pulled him into a hug. “Can you really save them?”

He trembled beneath my grasp. “I don’t know, but I’ll try. I’ll have to . . .” He gulped. “I’ll have to transform into my animal. I need to be physically close to someone to control them. That means I’ll have to swim after the boat until I’m close to it. Then I may be able to.”

I pulled him into another suffocating hug. “Oh, Edgar, please! Please try!”

~ ~ ~

Edgar transformed into his otter form in the back of the large sedan. From the groaning and screaming cries, I knew it pained him terribly. He wasn’t like Luke and Susannah, who regularly transformed into their animals and had grown somewhat immune to the pain. Edgar had never transformed in all the time I’d known him.

When he emerged, my eyes widened at how large he was. He was easily ten times the size of a normal otter.

Lifting his head, he sniffed the air. Before transforming, he’d divulged that he had tracking abilities similar to Susannah’s and Luke’s. Once he caught my babies’ scent, he would be able to find them.

Jet and Jasper stood near the road. Di had instructed them to use their mind-manipulation powers to their max. They were currently deterring anyone from driving near us. In the distance, we’d already seen a few cars stop and do a U-turn in the middle of the road. Since Edgar was exposing his animal form in public in broad daylight, we couldn’t have anyone see him. His size alone would garner too much attention and raise questions.

Bending down, I ran my hand over his head. It was soft and smooth. His thick otter fur would keep him warm in the frigid waters. “Be careful and stay safe.”

Worry swam in his inky irises, but he pushed his head up into my hand before he turned away.

Taking off, he moved awkwardly on the road then along the sandy beach, but once he hit the water, everything changed. He skimmed through the water as gracefully as a seal. With his immense strength and superior swimming ability, he cut through the water as swiftly as a shark.

My throat tightened. Albert's boat was still visible, but now, it was only a speck on the horizon.

"Do you really think he can catch them?" Flint asked. He crossed his arms, his mouth a tight line.

"I don't know." Luke placed a thick arm around my shoulders and squeezed. "But as we all know, Edgar's pretty quiet about his powers. He always has been. And from what he just confessed, he has stronger abilities than even me and Susannah. I don't think we should underestimate him."

Lena nodded. "I agree. We need to trust him."

An eagle's scream tore through the sky. Overhead, Susannah's large form was visible as she flew overhead, following Edgar. While we didn't know if she would be able to assist Edgar, she was another eye in the sky. She could keep watch from above and land on the boat if needed, but according to Edgar, if he was successful, he would be able to take control of Albert's mind. Once he was in control, Edgar would force him to turn the boat around and drive back to the coast.

And once Albert landed back on the beach, a bloody battle would no doubt ensue. Luke was out for blood.

Of that, I was sure.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

An agonizing thirty minutes passed. All of us stood facing the sea. Cold, salty wind whipped through the air, lifting the greasy locks from around my shoulders. Numbly, I lifted a long strand of my blond hair. *I haven't looked in the mirror in three days.*

A hysterical laugh bubbled up inside me. *And I haven't showered in three days, either.*

Before giving birth to the twins, I'd spent hours every day in front of the mirror primping and preening. I loved presenting my best self to the world even though Lena loved to give me a hard time about it, but fashion was like breathing to me. I was even studying it at school. My dream job was to design clothes. I let the greasy lock fall.

But none of that matters if my babies die.

Luke tightened his arm around me more.

"Is that them?" Flint pointed toward the ocean. His chestnut hair whipped in front of his eyes.

I straightened against Luke. "Do you see them?"

Father put his hands on his hips as Di shaded her eyes.

Lena jumped up and clapped. "It is them!"

I gasped and gripped Luke tightly. A distant eagle flying in the sky was visible as a boat grew closer. The vessel dipped in and out of view as it plunged up and down in the waves.

"Does anybody see Edgar?" I curled my fingers into Luke's side. His muscles clenched beneath my grip.

Di shook her head. "Does anyone else see him?"

"It's too bad Mica's not here." Lena took a step closer to the ocean. "She'd be able to."

"Jet and Jasper!" Di yelled toward the road.

The twins turned. Even from the distance, I could tell they were fatigued. They had been manipulating the traffic the entire time.

"What's up?" Jasper asked.

“That’s the boat!” Di yelled. “We need all traffic to stay away from this area. We can’t have anybody see what’s about to happen. Do you understand?”

Both of the twins nodded. Jasper’s mouth set into a tight line as Jet replied, “You got it. We’ll keep everybody away. Just do what needs to be done to get those babies back.”

I stepped closer to the water as my heart pounded. A few waves lapped against my ankles, soaking through my shoes. The frigid temperature caused goosebumps to sprout up on my arms. With each passing second, the boat moved closer.

I gasped when I caught sight of a sleek animal cutting through the water like a dolphin slipping through the sea. “There’s Edgar!”

Edgar bobbed up and down as he kept pace with the boat. The boat didn’t seem to be moving as quickly as it had been when it left. But it was still moving fast.

My heart pounded so hard, I thought I would pass out.

“Can anybody see them?” I waded deeper into the surf until I stood in it mid-calf. The boat headed straight for me.

Susannah screamed overhead. Her massive body flew right over us as she headed toward the trees across the road.

“Does anybody see Albert?” Father asked.

“No,” I replied. “I can only see someone driving the boat. It must be the captain!”

Through the boat’s front windshield, an unfamiliar man was visible in the wheelhouse. His face appeared blank while his hands stayed on the boat’s steering wheel. They were only fifty feet away now.

“He’s going to run the boat aground!” Luke yelled.

Splashing sounded behind me, then Luke grabbed me around the waist. He hauled me out of the way as the boat raced toward us.

The cool wind whipped around my soaked legs, chilling me, but my eyes stayed glued to the boat just as it rammed onto the beach.

Edgar appeared at the boat’s side. He shuffled out of the water in his otter form looking awkward on land.

A loud growl tore from Luke’s chest just as the sound of a wailing baby pierced my ears. In one giant leap, Luke was on the boat. With a blur of movement, Flint was at his side.

“Come on, sister. Let’s find your children!” Lena grabbed my hand, but I was already running.

The boat was an older fishing vessel. A large deck surrounded the enclosed wheelhouse. The man driving the boat still stood docilely behind the steering wheel.

Edgar brushed against my side on his way back to the car.

“Thank you, Edgar!”

I didn’t know if he heard me, but I didn’t stop to find out. Cold ocean water again drifted around my legs as Lena and I tried desperately to climb aboard the boat.

An arm appeared above me.

I glanced up to see Flint’s dark eyes and chestnut hair whipping through the breeze. His jaw was tight. “Luke’s in the cabin below. I’m not sure if you want to see this.”

I grabbed his hand. “I don’t care what he does to Albert. I just want my babies. Now!”

A shot rang out.

My blood turned cold.

The sickening sound of a human screaming tore through the side of the boat as another shot fired.

“What’s happening?” I asked, grabbing Flint’s hands.

A growl from below came next. The sound of fists landing on human flesh filled the air as more screams permeated the breeze.

“Albert must have a gun.” Flint’s jaw locked as he gripped me tightly around the forearms and hauled me onto the boat.

Please let Luke be okay! I turned down my hearing to filter out the sound of the fighting while searching for the sounds of my children. A whimper registered toward the back of the boat. My heart raced.

“Pull me up, Flint!” Lena yelled.

There was a blur to my left, then Lena was on the boat too. I didn’t stop to tell them what I’d heard. Instead, I sprinted to the stairs.

With Flint and Lena at my side, I descended the narrow steps two at a time. I almost tripped on the last step, but Flint caught me just in time.

It was darker below deck, and a fishy smell hung in the air. Off to the side, Luke had Albert around the neck. I breathed a sigh of relief that Luke appeared unharmed. Albert was another story. The older man’s eyes bulged as Luke choked the life out of him. A gun lay on the floor nearby.

“Is there anybody else on the boat?” I asked as Luke slammed Albert’s body against the wall of the ship. I winced at the sound. Violence had always made me sick.

“I don’t think so,” Flint replied.

Doing my best to ignore what my mate was doing, I closed my eyes and listened.

Another whimper permeated the air. My eyes flashed open. “They’re in there!” I said breathlessly and pointed at a closed door in the back.

Pushing away from Flint, I stumbled over tattered clothing, rope, and fishing equipment that cluttered the area. When I reached the door, I opened it with a mad flourish.

Light from a portside window streamed into the room. My hands flew to my mouth when I saw them.

Lying in a large box were my babies. They were crying and thrashing in anguish, clearly distraught.

I rushed to them and lifted them both in my arms simultaneously. “It’s okay! It’s okay, my darlings! Mama’s here!” I nuzzled them to my neck and pressed their warm bodies against my chest. Tears streamed down my cheeks.

Conroy fussed while Emma wailed and sucked on her fist. The feel of their tiny bodies shaking and so distressed made my knees weaken.

“Help me catch her!” Lena called from the doorway.

Flint and Lena’s hands cupped under my armpits just as my knees gave out.

Sobs wracked my chest as I clung desperately to my babies. “It’s okay, my darlings! It’s okay! I’ll never let him hurt you again!”

The tears fell in warm rivers as my heart broke. Albert had hurt my children. *How could I let that happen?*

Lena kneeled at my side and put an arm around me. “It’s okay, sis. They’re unharmed. They’re safe now. It’s okay.” Her hand trembled as she ran it up and down my back.

Her soothing words only made more tears come as the sound of Luke killing Albert filled the air behind me.

“Wait!” Another voice cut through the cabin. *Edgar*.

The sound of his feet on the stairs came next. “You can’t kill ’im, Luke! We need to know the chemical creation of the drug! Withou’ i’, we can’t save Emma!”

“You need to stop, Luke!” Di yelled. “With Edgar’s mind-controlling ability, he can access information from Albert’s memories, but we need Albert alive to do that! That means you need to stop!”

Edgar can access Albert’s memories?

That realization and the sound of my mate killing the old scientist made nausea rise within my throat.

“No!” I whispered. With Lena’s help, I staggered to my feet with both of my babies cradled to me. Their whimpers and cries had stopped.

Even though I was loath to do it, I gently moved them into Lena’s arms. “Hold them. I need to stop Luke.”

I left in a whirl with Flint at my side. The sight that greeted me in the main room made my stomach roll.

Albert lay in a bloodied heap on the floor. He was unconscious, and his face was badly swollen and bloody.

Splattered blood covered Luke’s hands and face. He still held the scientist by the throat, his fist reared back to pummel Albert again.

“Luke!” I screamed.

Flint disappeared in a blur. The next time he reappeared, Flint was holding on to Luke’s arm. Veins bulged from Flint’s neck as he tried to restrain my werewolf.

Luke fought against him. Flint groaned.

“Lena?” I turned to my sister.

Her gaze narrowed. “I’m trying to manipulate my energy ball around him, but he keeps moving!”

Despite Flint’s tremendous strength and Lena’s powerful energy manipulations, Luke continued to fight. *He’s out of control.* Unless he chose to stop, he’d keep fighting.

“Luke,” I said, advancing toward him.

Wild, predatory snarls came from Luke’s throat. Hair had sprouted on the backs of his hands.

I placed a hand on my mate’s cheek. Hot skin warmed my palm. “Luke. My love . . . you need to stop.”

I felt his energy shift as his wild eyes met mine. Rage coated his gaze, but then something else filled it. An awareness . . . of me.

“That’s right, my love. Come back to me.” I stepped closer until his nostrils flared. I knew he’d caught my scent. “You need to stop, Luke. You can’t kill him, not like this. We need him if we want to save our baby.” I

still didn’t fully understand how Edgar would read someone’s mind, but that didn’t matter. If there was any chance Edgar could extract the information we needed from Albert, then we needed to try.

Lena appeared in my peripheral vision. She moved closer to us. Emma and Conroy lay quietly in her arms.

An agonized growl tore from Luke’s throat at the sight of our children.

“See, my love?” I crooned. “They’re safe. Emma and Conroy are fine, but if we want them to stay that way, we need Albert. You can’t kill him.”

Ragged breaths filled the room, puffing from Luke’s chest as the hair slowly receded from the backs of his hands.

Flint’s grip on Luke’s arms lessened.

Luke’s wide stance shifted as his deep breaths slowed. With one last growl in Albert’s direction, Luke pulled me into his arms.

I held on to him as his large frame trembled.

“I’m sorry,” he said gruffly. “I lost control.” The guttural note in his voice was gone. His wolf side had fully submitted to his human control.

I ran a hand up and down his back. His huge muscles jumped beneath my light touch. “I know. It’s okay.”

Silence filled the room as my family looked on.

Father appeared at the top of the boat’s stairs. He took them down quickly. With his wispy hair flying around his head, he took in the horrific scene in front of him, his eyes growing wider with each passing second. Swaying into the stair’s handrail, he asked, “Is Albert still alive?”

Di kneeled at Albert’s side and placed two fingers against his neck. “Yes, but barely.” She glanced up at Edgar. “What do you need to do to access his memories?”

Edgar breathed heavily as his hands balled into fists. “I need ’im alive. It doesn’ matta’ if he’s awake or asleep. But he needs ta be livin’ for me to find the information.”

“Let’s get him back to the vehicle,” Father said. “What happens to him after that information is retrieved, I don’t know, but right now, nobody is dying.”

~ ~ ~

We managed to haul the unconscious scientist out of the boat and into the back of the vehicle. As for the man who had driven the boat—we left

him.

Flint had extracted his wallet, and after rifling through papers kept in the fishing vessel, it became apparent the man was nothing other than a normal fisherman who lived in the nearby town. Most likely, Albert had either paid him off to transport the babies across the ocean, or he'd used force to make the man do it.

Considering Albert had carried a gun and didn't seem fazed about using it, we all figured Albert had forced the older fisherman to do his bidding.

The fisherman had fallen into a deep sleep after Edgar's manipulations. And since Edgar insisted the man would be fine and would not remember anything when he woke, we left.

The ride back to Portland felt like it passed in minutes. Since we didn't have car seats, Luke cradled our babies to him. His steel-like strength kept them safely cocooned in his arms. Having them close to him also seemed to calm his rage.

"Let's get onboard and get moving," Di said when we pulled into the airport.

Evening had arrived, with night on the cusp. My stomach growled, and it was only then I realized I hadn't eaten anything since lunch. With a dazed feeling, I stepped out of the car. The past eight hours had been a living nightmare.

Greg was waiting for us on the tarmac. "It's a relief to see you have them back." His eyes crinkled in the corners when he smiled, then his gaze dipped down to study the infants still cradled to Luke's chest. He ran his finger gently along Conroy's cheek before he added, "I've already cleared our flight plan. I'll have you home in no time."

"Thank you, Greg." I smiled and squeezed his hand before boarding the plane.

Once onboard, I took the babies so Luke could help load Albert discreetly onto the plane. As I settled back into my seat, I still couldn't believe that we had managed to rescue them. However, we weren't in the clear yet. Since we didn't know the chemical composition of Albert's drug for certain, my darling daughter was still within death's grasp.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Father wore a brooding expression when we took off from Portland's airport.

Albert lay passed out in the middle of the jet. Outside, shadowy nighttime clouds drifted over the jet's wings as we climbed higher into the sky.

Di huddled over Albert's unconscious body while Edgar sat near his head.

My werewolf had beat up Albert so severely that he still hadn't regained consciousness, but it didn't stop Edgar from doing whatever he was doing.

I clutched little Conroy to my chest as he slept. Luke held Emma, who thankfully hadn't transformed since Di had brought the medication along, but if Edgar wasn't able to extract the information we needed from Albert's memory, we would run out of the drug in a month.

"He's struggling," I whispered.

Luke grumbled beside me, but his gaze didn't leave Edgar. Father stood and joined Di while everyone else looked on.

Edgar had his eyes closed. Beads of sweat covered his upper lip and shaved scalp. Both of his hands were placed on Albert's head while Edgar groaned and trembled.

"He doesn't use his powers enough." Luke shifted in his seat. "He's unpracticed. That's why he's struggling."

I rocked Conroy against me and bit my lip. "Maybe he can still do it."

We sped east at thirty-five thousand feet. Di listened raptly as Edgar slowly told her bit by bit of what he found in Albert's memory.

From the tight frown on Di's face and her worried looks at Father, it was obvious they were concerned too.

"I need more detail than that," Di said again. The plane dropped abruptly, and she reached out to steady herself.

Sweat lined Edgar's brow. He breathed out a rush of air and fell back on his butt. With tired-looking eyes, he shook his head. "I'm trying, Di, bu' i' isn' easy. I don't know what half these bloody things mean that I'm tellin' ya, and I jus' tell ya as I see i'!"

I cast a worried look at Lena and Susannah. They sat across the aisle from us, and considering their brows were puckered too, I could tell it wasn't just worry over extracting the chemical formula that had them concerned. Edgar's accent had returned. I hadn't heard it so thick since we'd first met him.

"Just keep trying," Father said soothingly. "You're doing a wonderful job. Do you need a break?"

I bit my lip harder. The longer it took Edgar, the more likely it was we would have problems. Once Albert regained consciousness, who knew what would happen. He certainly wouldn't cooperate. For all we knew, he would be able to throw up some kind of mental shield and stop Edgar from extracting any more information.

Edgar shook his head tiredly. "I don' need a break."

Father inched closer to Edgar and placed a hand on his shoulder. "Just do your best. We can only ask for that, and if you can't acquire everything we need, we'll work with what we have."

After a few minutes, Edgar took a deep breath and placed his hands back on Albert's head. "I'll keep tryin', bu' I can'na promise it'll work."

"That's fine, Edgar. It's just fine. Do what you can." Father removed his hand as Edgar closed his eyes and began once more.

Di picked up her notepad and scribbled the bits and pieces that Edgar extracted from Albert's memory, but any hope I'd felt earlier was rapidly disintegrating as it became apparent Edgar's abilities were strained to their max.

~ ~ ~

We landed in Colorado an hour later. By the time the wheels touched the runway, Edgar was shaking so badly that he pushed back and landed in a heap by the jet's window.

"I'm sorry! That's all I can do!" He folded his knees up and latched his arms around them before rocking back and forth. A soft wail escaped his lips.

I shifted Conroy in my arms and handed him to Luke. “Can you hold him?”

Luke held both babies awkwardly, but they didn’t stir. I rushed to Edgar’s side. Hunkering down, I placed my hand on his arm.

He jumped.

“It’s all right, Edgar. You did amazing,” I said soothingly as he wailed softly. “Without everything that you’ve done, my babies wouldn’t be safe. They wouldn’t be with me and Luke.”

Edgar lifted his head for a fraction of a second. A dark, haunted look glazed his eyes. “I fink it’s o’right, now, in’it, love?”

A stone formed in my stomach at the vacant depth of his gaze. I settled onto the floor beside him and put my arm around his shoulders. “Yes, everything’s all right, and I want to thank you for what you did. For everything you’ve done. If you hadn’t helped—” My throat tightened. “My babies could be lost forever. I’ll always be grateful to you.”

He nodded but began rocking again. “It’s o’right now. It’s o’right now,” he said over and over again. A soft knocking sound filled the jet as he rocked back and forth against the wall.

A shadow appeared above me before Susannah dropped to the floor on Edgar’s other side. Her smile was strained when it met mine.

She squeezed Edgar’s hand. “It’s okay, love. I’m here.”

I pulled back to give her space.

Susannah’s voice dropped to a whisper as she spoke quietly to Edgar. The jet continued to roll along the runway, the occasional bumps from cracks in the concrete jarring us. Edgar’s rocking didn’t stop, but after a minute, it slowed. Whatever Susannah said to him seemed to be helping.

The jet pulled to an abrupt halt. I flashed Father and Di a worried look.

Di’s brow was puckered as she studied the notes in her hand. She kept biting her fingernail as she scanned page after page of chemical formulas and preparation instructions.

The information that had spewed from Edgar’s mouth had been like Chinese to me, but since Di and Father dipped their heads together and quietly spoke about the information, I knew they understood it.

“Do you think it’s enough?” I asked.

Di flipped to another page, then another. “Maybe.”

Father sighed heavily. “We’re still missing information, but I think it’s enough. We’ll have to see what we can do.”

A low moan escaped Edgar.

I glanced worriedly at Susannah and then my sister.

“He’ll be all right.” Lena walked up the aisle toward me. Behind her, Flint, Luke, Jet, and Jasper looked on anxiously. She put a hand on my shoulder. “Eventually . . .”

Greg appeared at the front of the jet, his trim build and clear eyes taking in the chaotic scene with nothing more than a nod at Father. “I’ll get the door open so you can be on your way.”

Within minutes, we were out of the plane and rushing to our vehicles. Since it was nighttime, we had darkness to shield our movements. It helped that Flint carried Albert at his speed. A blur to my left and a slight struggle with folding the still-unconscious scientist into the back of our SUV, and we were off.

Greg waved before climbing aboard the jet. Once again, I was amazed that he never questioned or blinked an eye at some of the crazy things we did. I knew Lena had spoken to him more than any of us, and from what she’d told me, our pilot was loyal to Father through and through. I had no idea how we would have gotten away with half of our shenanigans if he hadn’t been. It wasn’t the first time we had transported unconscious individuals across state lines.

“Let’s get back to Father’s house.” Di’s clipped words filled the cab as Flint sped toward the interstate. “With any luck, Father and I can figure out how to recreate the drug we need for Emma.”

Little Emma’s hand was curled around my finger as she slept soundly in her car seat. Her lips were parted as her breath came out in tiny puffs.

“And what about this dude?” Jet hooked a thumb toward Albert’s sleeping form in the back.

The sound of Edgar’s soft wails came again at the mention of the scientist. Susannah continued to croon soothingly to him. It was the first time I’d seen the tables turned. For many months, it had been Edgar who had pulled Susannah back from the edge of insanity. Now, Susannah was trying to help him.

“Albert lives,” I replied before anybody else could say otherwise. “There’s been enough violence and bloodshed. Murdering him is out of the question. If we do that, we’re no better than him.” My tone was quiet yet firm, leaving no room open for the discussion of killing the scientist.

Luke growled at my side.

I gave my mate a sympathetic look.

I knew Luke wanted Albert dead, and even though I didn't necessarily want the malicious scientist alive either, I still wasn't willing to allow any of us to murder him in cold blood.

That wasn't who we were.

I gripped Luke's hand tightly as that absolute decision sank in, because I also knew that as long as the older scientist remained alive, we would never be free of him.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"What are we going to do with him?" Amber asked with a yawn as she peered down at the unconscious Albert. It was near midnight, but we were all still awake.

Our entire family stood in the living room with crossed arms and worried expressions. Only Edgar was missing. He'd retreated to his bedroom as soon as we stepped into Father's home. He'd shut his bedroom door on all of us, even Susannah. When I'd tried to go to him, I'd talked to a blank door. He hadn't replied.

Flint crossed his arms. A lock of his chestnut hair fell across his forehead. "We can't kill him. Jacinda won't allow it."

A slight hum from the HVAC system filled the room. I fiddled with my hearing to tune it out.

Luke grumbled and raked a hand through his hair. He gave me a hard look. "So we let him live and leave the possibility that he could kidnap our children again?" A ferocious growl tore from his throat. "That's *not* an option."

My brow furrowed at my mate's anger, but I held firm. "We're not killing him."

"What about keeping him permanently locked up in the basement?" Mica asked. "That's not killing him, right?"

"But that's still evil." I cuddled both of my babies to my chest and settled deeper into the living room's armchair.

"But it would keep your kids safe." Jet scratched his jaw before leaning against the wall and crossing his arms.

Jasper stood beside him with his hands on his hips. "And he'd still be alive."

"No. Jacinda's right." Di's expression was grim. She'd changed into black yoga pants and a T-shirt—comfy clothes—but her shrewd expression hadn't relaxed. "Locking him away against his will in the basement is no different to what he and Marcus did to us. It's out of the question."

“Then what do we do?” Lena’s long wavy hair brushed against her shoulders as she surveyed everyone. “We can’t let him hurt Emma and Conroy again.” She shuddered.

I bit my lip as my heart pounded. My entire body felt unspeakably tired after all that had happened, but I couldn’t rest yet. *What can we do?*

And then, it came to me, the way the sun’s rays wash across the land, bathing the hills in golden light. I gasped and bolted upright in my chair. Conroy stirred, but Emma continued to sleep soundly. “I know! I know what we can do!”

All eyes turned on me.

“We can give him the memory-erasing drug that Father gave us! We can take away Albert’s memories! He’ll wake up, just like we did two years ago, and he’ll have no idea who he is or what’s been done to him. He’ll forget all about us and all about my babies!”

Lena’s jaw dropped just as Flint smiled.

A light grew in Luke’s gaze as he cocked his head.

Jet whooped. “Would that work?”

Di’s eyes shone brighter as a grin stretched across her face. She rubbed her hands together.

Father nodded, a smile lifting his cheeks. “Yes, Jacinth. I think that would work quite well.”

~ ~ ~

Father and Di retreated to the lab to extract the memory drug while Lena called Greg to tell him not to leave for Florida yet. In a few hours, Di and Father would be returning to the airport to board our private jet with Albert in tow. Albert would wake up in Chicago with no memory of who he was or what had happened to him.

The memory drug was something Father had given to us that fateful day over two years ago when he’d tried to integrate us into the real world. After drugging us, he’d deposited us in various cities throughout the U.S. in hopes that we would start lives of our own, in a world without O’Brien—a world without sinister scientists, without hiding, with no memories of who we were or what had happened to us. Minus those memories we were no longer a threat to the drug company, but Father’s drug had ultimately failed. We’d all felt the urge to return to our Colorado home, but our full memories

had never returned, not without the antidote. *With any luck, Albert's full memory will never return either.*

"I have a dose." Di walked into the room carrying a tray that held a large syringe and vial. This drug required a lumbar puncture.

Jasper cocked his head. "Uh . . . I just thought of something. How can we give Albert the dose and then take him back to his home looking like that?" He pointed to Albert's multiple cuts and bruises.

Mica's mouth dropped open. "Good point."

Father's brow furrowed. "He was away in Europe when I contacted him. His staff wasn't expecting him back for a few weeks. With any luck, by the time they show up, his injuries will be healed enough to not draw attention."

Mica grinned. "Crisis averted."

"Now, as I was saying." Di moved closer to Albert. "I have the dose ready for him."

Jet's eyebrows rose. "Should we be concerned that this drug is still around? I'd hate to piss you off and have you use that on me."

Mica laughed. "Best behave then."

I smothered a laugh at Di's exasperated expression.

Lena smiled too before she snapped her cell phone closed. "I caught Greg in time. He just refueled and was about to take off, but he'll wait at the airport for us to return."

"Good," Di said curtly. "Then let's begin."

Luke hunkered by my side. I'd just finished feeding both Conroy and Emma. My lids were drooping, but there was no way I wasn't staying awake to watch Albert be eradicated from our lives once and for all. Without seeing it, I would no doubt be haunted by his potential return. I needed to know we were safe.

"Do you want me to take them?" Amber held out her arms to me, her gaze on Emma and Conroy. Her pixie haircut was in disarray, but her eyes were bright.

I sat forward. "Of course, thank you."

A smile grew on Amber's face when she took an infant in each arm. "It's the first time I've held them." She peered down at their tiny faces.

I squeezed her hand before she settled onto a chair near the kitchen, her attention solely on my babies. Similar to me, Amber shied away from

violence. I wasn't surprised that she'd preferred to watch over the infants instead of witnessing what was to come with Albert.

Having my babies only feet away calmed my heart. I knew it was irrational to be worried about placing the babies in the nursery to sleep, since the man who'd abducted them lay at our feet, but that fear was still there. I didn't know how long it would take to leave them alone in a room without fear they would go missing.

A groan filled the air.

My hearing automatically tuned in to it.

Albert stirred. Everyone tensed around him.

"He's waking up," I whispered.

Albert lifted a hand to his head, touching his swollen eye and jaw. Dried blood matted his thinning hair. He winced. "Where . . ."

Luke growled and advanced.

My arm shot out to stop him. "No, Luke. No more violence."

Anger simmered from Luke, and his skin warmed under my touch, but he held himself back. Similar to on the boat, my touch calmed him. We'd always been like that. He was the yin to my yang. The dark to my light. It was one of the reasons I loved him so much. We balanced each other in ways I'd never thought possible.

"Albert?" I stepped closer to him.

Luke growled, but he didn't stop me.

The old scientist's non-swollen eye cracked open. Awareness slid though his expression. His head swiveled around from where he lay. "Where am I?"

"Our home. We brought you here from Oregon. After what you did to our children, there was no way we could let you go."

His eye widened, but the other remained puffy and closed.

My heart broke that it had come to this. Looking at Albert now—old, defenseless, at the mercy of whatever we chose to do to him—made a deep, aching sadness well up inside me. It didn't matter that he was evil and had hurt us in unspeakable ways. He was still a person. A human being who had rights like everyone else.

I didn't want power over him. I didn't want to hurt him. I didn't relish the thought of turning him into a lost soul with no memory of who he was or what had happened to him. I just wanted to live in peace—free from violence, free from shadows lurking in every corner, free from a world

where someone could snatch my children away at any second to study them. *If only you had allowed that, Albert. If only you'd chosen to do something good for once. None of this would have been necessary.*

I kneeled at Albert's side. "We're going to drug you."

He licked his dry lips, and his gaze narrowed. "Drug me?" His voice was a raspy whisper. "What do you mean?"

"What I mean is that we're going to inject you with a drug that will take away all of your memories. The next time you wake up, you'll have no memory of me, my family, my children, or what you've done in your life. You won't know anything about your company, your research, or all of the unspeakable things that you've done. You'll wake up only knowing your name; that's it."

An arrogant gleam entered his eye. "A drug like that doesn't exist."

Father stepped up behind me. "It does. I developed it outside of O'Brien. Believe me, it works."

Albert's breath stopped. "You can't do that! You can't give me something like that!"

I met his gaze, my resolve absolute. "Would you rather die? That's what some here want."

Albert shuffled back on the floor, but Flint appeared at his head in a lightning-fast move. Flint's feet stopped him from moving farther.

Luke appeared above Albert next. "I'd be more than happy to kill you if you'd rather we go that route." A predatory gleam glowed in Luke's eyes.

Genuine fear entered Albert's expression at the sight of my werewolf. Albert shrank back into the floor, as if shriveling into himself like a dried old prune. "Conroy?" His gaze sought out Father's. "Old friend . . . you wouldn't do something like this to me. You know that—"

"You chose this path when you abducted my children," I said softly. I inched closer to him. Once again, sadness filled me, but Albert had given us no choice. "I wish you had chosen to use your intellect, knowledge, and financial power to help others, but instead, you chose to hurt innocent people. We can't allow that to continue, and I won't allow you to hurt my children again."

Albert looked around wildly as Flint and Jet grabbed his arms. They forced him to sit upright in a hunched-over position.

"Wait! It doesn't have to be like this! I can change! I will!" he wailed.

Di and Father leaned down to swab his back with iodine.

I sat back on my haunches and hung my head. “It’s too late for that.”

~ ~ ~

When Father and Di injected Albert with the drug, the old scientist fell unconscious within seconds. As Albert’s eyes closed, a shaved head appeared from around the living room’s entryway. Edgar stood just at the edge of the room, lurking in the shadows.

The haunted look was still on his face, but when Albert fell in a heap, something changed in Edgar’s expression—an awareness that this had ended.

I stood and went to Edgar’s side. I took his hand in mine. Cool and dry, it hung limply, like a ragdoll’s. I squeezed him anyway. “He can’t hurt us again, Edgar. He can’t hurt you. We’re safe now. Once again, we’re safe.”

For the first time since Edgar had used his powers to rescue my children, a light filled his eyes, pushing away the darkness and despair that lined his face. “It’s o’right now?”

I squeezed him harder. “Yes, Edgar. It’s all right.”

EPILOGUE

Emma sat upright on her blanket in the nursery and waved a rattle. Little Conroy crawled around her. I cooed to them and smiled tenderly when Conroy pulled on my knee into a kneeling position.

Sunlight streamed into the room as the sound of downtown Denver filtered up from below. September had arrived, but the weather remained warm. Since I was still feeding my little ones around the clock, I'd put my schooling on hold. One day, I would finish my degree, but right now, my attention was needed at home.

Luke laughed. His massive body was stretched out across the carpet as he lay on his side with his head cupped in his hand. Pride filled his tone when Conroy pulled himself into my lap. "He's a strong little bugger."

"That he is. They both are." I rubbed Emma's back when she dropped to all fours and crawled toward me too. Soon, both of my babies were on their knees and trying to crawl into my arms.

Despite them only being two months old, it was obvious they weren't normal infants. Most babies at that age still couldn't sit, let alone crawl, but our babies were doing both and had been for over two weeks.

Father and Di figured it was due to their altered genetics. Every day, their strength and uncanny development made it very apparent they took after Luke more than me.

I lifted a cloth to wipe the drool that had pooled around Emma's lips. She was easily twice the size she'd been at birth and had stayed human ever since that horrible day in Oregon. Father and Di had managed to recreate the drug Marcus and Albert had invented by using the information Edgar had extracted.

My daughter was finally safe.

I smiled sadly, thinking of Edgar. He still hadn't fully recovered, but each day, he seemed a little better. With our family surrounding him, loving him, and supporting him, he'd improved. However, his strange powers hadn't emerged again. Similar to how he'd been before, he seemed loath to

use them. His help this summer had been a one-off, desperate attempt to save our children, and none of us pushed him to embrace his altered genetics. He didn't want to, and it was his right to choose that.

I sighed wistfully. While realistically, it could still take months before his pseudo-Cockney accent fully disappeared and that haunted remnant left his eyes, I knew with time, it would. We certainly weren't giving up on him. He was family. And family never gave up on one another.

"Is everyone coming to visit this weekend?" I asked as my thoughts stayed on Edgar.

Luke nodded. A small smile lifted his lips. "Yes, including Edgar. Susannah managed to get him out for a walk a few days ago, and she said most days now, he comes out of his room."

Hope filled my heart. "I'm so relieved to hear that."

Emma wrapped her little fist around my finger then giggled. My heart warmed even more.

"And Grace?" I asked. "Will she be joining us too?" My lips twitched into a smile when I removed my shirt to feed my demanding babies.

Conroy wailed until he latched on. He sucked greedily as his sister settled in to feed on my other breast.

"Luke?" I said when my mate didn't reply.

Luke's eyes had darkened as his gaze settled on my ample bosom. I was completely exposed.

"Luke?" I quirked an eyebrow. "Is Grace coming too?"

He inched closer to me, his gaze still on my breasts. "I'll never grow tired of watching you feed our babes," he said huskily.

I laughed since his attention was most definitely not on my question.

"Perhaps we can have a little fun after these two go down for a nap?" I eyed him suggestively.

He growled.

"Now, what we were talking about?" I asked demurely. "Oh yes. This weekend. Is *everyone* coming?"

Luke seemed reluctant to lift his gaze, but he finally did. "Yes, everyone, from what I hear. I hope you and Jet go easy on poor Raven. He's got it bad for Grace."

I laughed again as my babies continued suckling. "I know, which is exactly why I hope she's there."

Luke chuckled, the deep sound filling the room.

“Is there any current news on Albert?” I nervously threaded a hand through my hair. My blow-out from yesterday still had my long locks textured and soft.

His gaze softened. “The latest report from Conroy’s spies is that everyone thinks old Albert has gone senile. I believe they’ve even hired a nurse to care for him twenty-four hours a day in his home. He apparently spends most of his time wandering around, asking who everybody is. And since he can’t remember the passcode to his lab, he can’t access anything in the basement.”

I breathed a sigh of relief at hearing that. My biggest fear had been that Albert would study his old files and that something from his previous research would trigger his memory.

Luke put a warm hand on my thigh. “Don’t worry, my love. With every year that passes, he’ll grow older and less of a threat. Most likely, he’ll spend the rest of his days drooling while staring blankly out the window.”

My shoulders relaxed even more. Every day, gratitude filled me that we’d been able to find a non-violent solution to keep our family safe while allowing Albert to live.

Emma fell off my nipple, drawing my attention back to her. I settled her into the crook of my arm. Conroy soon followed. Both of them smiled lazily as their full tummies put them off to sleep.

Luke inched closer as my prominent breasts jutted out in front of me. “Now, my love, what were you saying about putting these two down for a nap?”

I laughed as he helped me to my feet. “Oh, I think you know exactly what I was saying, my love.”

ILLUMINATION

The Lost Children World
Book Three

THE LOST CHILDREN SERIES—BOOK 6

CHAPTER ONE

"Just go talk to her. It's not that hard. Just go up to her, say hi, and ask if she wants to go to a movie or get a coffee or have dinner. Seriously, dude, just do it!" I paced outside the living room, alone in the hallway, talking to myself. 'Cause talking outloud to myself was a good look, obviously. But thankfully, Grace couldn't hear me, although Jacinda probably could.

I groaned. My adopted sister would probably tease me about my nervousness to no end. Never mind that Jacinda had two six month old babies to look after. Both of those babies had been inflicted with altered genetics thanks to their parents' crazy origins, but even though the babies kept her busy, Jacinda still found time to tease me.

My pace increased, my feet sliding along the thick carpet. Whenever Grace joined Lena on our weekend family visits, I'd act like a complete moron. Every time. If I wasn't fawning and staring, like a tongue-tied idiot, I was pacing and talking to myself, trying to work up the courage to ask her out.

Of course, Jet and Jacinda made sure to give me a wink or make a sly comment to let me know that they enjoyed my discomfort immensely.

Damn sisters and damn brothers. Even Amber and Susannah had started teasing me. I couldn't get away from it. *Okay, then stop talking to yourself so nobody hears you.*

My hands balled into fists as my feet sank even deeper into the carpet in my adoptive father's reclusive Colorado mansion. I ran a hand through my dark hair. Nerves churned in my stomach as the *whooshing* from my steps carried down the hall.

On the other side of the massive windows lining the end of the hallway, snow flew. The new year had arrived, and winter gripped the land. At the moment, all of us had a break from our college courses which gave us plenty of free time, free time that we hadn't had in months, which meant that I had the perfect excuse to *finally* ask Grace out on a date.

If only I could work up the courage.

“Oh, look at him! He’s so cute!” Grace’s soft, lilting voice, the voice that always sent a tingle down my spine, carried over the laughter and steady conversation that took place only a room away.

I stopped pacing and peeked around the corner into the large living space. My family lay sprawled on the furniture. My heart rate increased at the sight of Grace. She sat on the carpet, next to Lena, while they played with Jacinda and Luke’s babies. Grace’s long blond hair trailed down her back, her beautiful blue eyes wide and luminous.

Damn. Why does she have to be so gorgeous?

But it wasn’t just her beauty that attracted me. It was everything. Lena’s best friend had become a part of our family over the past six months. She was the only normal human outside of our family that knew about our sinister origins and O’Brien Pharmaceuticals. She knew that all of us had altered genetics and displayed some type of extrasensory, paranormal, or animalistic power.

Yet Grace accepted us. All of us. Her kindness, willingness to always be there for Lena, and her trustworthiness meant she’d safeguard our secret origins no matter what.

Grace was gorgeous, inside and out, and single too.

But I was too big of a pussy to ask her out.

“She’s so strong. Aren’t you, little Emma girl? Look at you go!” Grace kneeled down, cooing to the six-month-old.

Emma pushed to her feet and toddled over to Grace. She drooled all over Grace’s finger before walking on chubby legs back to Jacinda and Luke. From there, she did the rounds, going to each and every person in the room: Father, Di, Amber, Susannah, Jasper, Mica, Edgar, and Lena. Jacinda and Luke’s twin babies had been graced with numerous aunts and uncles, thanks to our unusual family, although Flint and Jet were missing from the socializing in the living room.

Little Conroy, unlike Emma, was in his wolf form. He’d been that way since the afternoon, yipping and running while he played on the floor. Jasper chased him, letting the little guy chew on his fingers. Most likely, Conroy would transform back to his human baby form within the next hour or two. He never stayed a wolf for too long, and to Luke’s absolute delight, his son was strong enough to go for short runs around the backyard while Luke also ran as a wolf.

A soft yip came from Conroy when he pounced on Jasper’s head.

“You rascal!” Jasper laughed and swatted him away, but Conroy just jumped backward before pouncing again.

Unlike his sister, little Conroy had only learned how to transform a week ago. Jacinda had nearly had a heart attack when it happened, but so far, Conroy hadn’t demonstrated any of the detrimental effects that Emma had from transforming. That, of course, meant Jacinda had plenty of energy to tease me about my unrelenting crush on Lena’s best friend.

“Come here, Conroy. You cute little boy!” Grace cooed and scooped Conroy up. He wiggled and squirmed, trying valiantly to climb higher in her lap so he could lick her with his lapping pink tongue.

That’s one lucky puppy. I sagged against the wall, my stomach flipping as I watched her.

“Ogling again, bro?” A large hand clamped onto my shoulder. “You know, you’re kinda turning into a Peeping Tom.” Jet snickered and squeezed my shoulder. “You sure you don’t want to go in there and ask her out?”

I straightened and swallowed. “What are you talking about?” I asked as innocently as I could manage.

Jet’s blue eyes twinkled. He brushed back his dark curly hair. “It’s been over six months, Raves. Your interest is kinda turning into an obsession. If you don’t ask this girl out, I might ask her instead.”

My mouth dropped, my eyes flaming. “You wouldn’t! You know how I feel about her.” Even though I wore contacts, the fire still rose up inside me, but Jet wouldn’t know that since the contacts hid my internal fire.

“He’s kidding.” Flint’s deep voice came from the end of the hall. He sauntered up to us, his movements fluid and graceful. Like me, he had olive-toned skin and a tall lean build. As my only biological brother, he looked like me, but Flint’s chestnut hair was lighter than my black hair, and his dark eyes were normal, not like my fire-filled irises.

Flint leaned against the wall, crossing his arms. “Don’t worry, Raven. Jet won’t ask Grace out. Besides, Grace only has eyes for you. I don’t know why you haven’t already asked her.”

I swallowed, my throat suddenly feeling dry. How did I explain to my brothers that the thought of her potential rejection hurt so freakin’ much that I felt sick?

I’d never had a girlfriend, not really. I’d dated a few girls and hooked up a few times, but I’d never had an actual *girlfriend*. Lena said I was too

shy, that I needed to come out of my shell, but that was easier said than done. Besides, I didn't think I could handle Grace's rejection. Because if she said no . . .

I squeezed my eyes shut, groaning inwardly. "It would kill me if she didn't want to go out with me."

Jet placed his hand back on my shoulder and squeezed it again. "Dude, you only live once. You're wasting your life pining away for her. Just ask her. Trust me. She'll say yes." He dropped his hand, that cocky light in his eyes returning. "All you gotta do is walk up to her, flex your guns a bit, toss back your hair, and give her one of those smiles. Chicks love that stuff. Trust me. I do it all the time. Just act confident, bro. Chicks love confidence. Sometimes, you gotta fake it till ya make it. If you do, she'll say yes."

"Fake it till you make it. Right." When I finally looked up, both Jet and Flint were nodding, encouraging me to get in there and do what I'd been too scared to do for the previous six months.

"He's right," Flint added. "You're wasting your chance. She's not gonna wait for you forever."

"But if she's as into me as you two both claim, why hasn't *she* asked *me* out?" I curled my fingers into my palms. "It's not like it's the eighteenth century. Women ask out men."

Jet shrugged. "Maybe she's worried about rejection too."

Flint nudged me toward the door. "Ask her. Just do it. You're going to kick yourself in the future if you don't."

Sweat broke out on my palms, turning them into a sweaty mess. My heart leaped in my chest at the thought of walking across the room and asking her out. Not to mention, my entire family would witness my embarrassing fail if she said no.

"Go, dude." Jet pushed me, and I stumbled into the room.

Grace's head snapped up when I regained my footing. An attractive flush filled her cheeks.

"Hey, Raven!" Lena said cheerfully. She gave Grace side-eyes, but Grace didn't see it. Grace's chin had dipped, her flush turning to a blush. "Come sit with us." Lena waved me over.

I awkwardly walked across the room, the conversation around me falling silent, but then Jet came into the room and snatched up Conroy.

“What you up to, you little bugger?” He scratched Conroy behind the ears, but Conroy whipped his head around and clamped onto Jet’s fingers, his little razor sharp teeth penetrating Jet’s skin.

“Ouch!” He pried Conroy off his hand but chuckled anyway. “You’re getting fast, you little trouble maker.”

Luke grunted with pride. “He takes after me.”

Luke, the largest member of our family, lay sprawled out on the couch beside Jacinda, his massive frame taking up most of the sofa. His shoulders spanned at least three feet, and his hands were as big as dinner plates.

Jacinda smiled, her full lips glossy from some shiny lipstick she wore. She tossed back her blond, perfectly styled hair. “Nice to see you, Raven. I wondered if you’d join us.” She winked, making my teeth grit.

“Uh, yeah. I was doing some stuff in the back.” I sat down by Lena, Grace on her other side. Grace peeked up at me, her blue eyes so vibrant that I wanted to drown in them.

“Hi, Raven.” She smiled tentatively.

I cleared my throat. “Hi. How are . . . how are ya doing?”

She shrugged and picked at the carpet. “Pretty good. It’s kinda nice to have a break from class.”

“Ah, yeah. Totally. I mean, I hate having class too. I mean, I don’t hate it, and not that you said you hated it, but—” I snapped my mouth shut, wanting to smack myself.

There I went again, acting like a freakin’ idiot.

“I know what you mean.” Grace piped in. She smiled shyly. “It’s nice to have a break.”

My shoulders sagged, that feeling in my stomach growing. God, she was amazing, always trying to make everyone feel better and putting up with my tongue-tied sentences like they were normal.

Grace sat up straighter, some of her primness returning. It was another thing I loved about her. She was always so proper, and so on top of things. It was probably why she and Lena meshed so well. They were complete opposites in some ways, but those opposite qualities seemed to strengthen their friendship.

“So what are you up to this weekend, Raven?” Lena nudged me, her green eyes twinkling. Her long, curly red hair sat in a messy bun on the top of her head, making her small nose and fragile features look striking.

“I . . . uh . . .” I wiped my sweaty palms on my pants. I knew Lena had asked me that question as an opening for me to ask Grace out. As embarrassing as it was, my entire family knew about my crush.

Lena’s eyebrows rose, her expression encouraging.

Just do it! I sat up straighter and before I could lose my courage, I blurted, “I was actually going to see if Grace was free and wanted to hang out this weekend.”

The entire room fell quiet. *Shit.*

Grace’s mouth parted, her tongue darting out to moisten her lips. Seeing her little pink tongue made something else stir inside me. *God, she’s so gorgeous.*

Lena grinned, nudging Grace. “Did you hear that? Raven’s wondering if you want to hang out this weekend. Since it’s only Friday, you two could spend the whole weekend together.”

Grace’s cheeks bloomed bright red, then she bit her bottom lower lip.

My heart pounded. She hadn’t said yes. Why hadn’t she said yes?

“I, um . . .”

Oh my God, she’s going to say no.

My gaze shot to the floor, nausea rolling through my stomach. *I’m going to throw up.*

Grace twisted her hands. “I would love to, but I’m going home in the morning to see my family in Wyoming.”

I raked a hand through my hair, the movement reminding me that I hadn’t followed Jet’s advice. The smooth-talker had told me to toss back my hair, flex my biceps, and grin. I’d failed miserably on all accounts, and now Grace had rejected me.

“Oh, yeah, that’s totally fine,” I mumbled. “No problem.”

Lena frowned, her eyebrows drawing together. “I didn’t know you were going home tomorrow. You never told me that.”

“I hadn’t planned to, but my mom—” Grace’s voice caught. “She called this afternoon. She’s sick and isn’t doing well, so she asked me to come home to see her.”

Lena angled her body toward Grace. “Your mom isn’t doing well? Then that’s great you’re going home to see your family, especially since you never seem to get a chance to visit. But how are you getting there?”

“I was going to drive.”

Lena’s eyebrows shot up. “In your old rust bucket that barely runs?”

Grace shrugged, her cheeks brightening even more. “I know. It’s not the greatest car, but . . .” Her voice trailed off again. “I have to go home.” An edge entered her tone.

I frowned, some of my embarrassment diminishing as I studied her body language. A light sheen of sweat covered Grace’s forehead, and she was picking more at the carpet. In a way she almost looked . . . frightened.

But Lena just grinned. “I know! Raven can drive you! He traded his Mercedes in for a new car. He just got it last week, and then you won’t have to worry about your clunker breaking down.”

My mouth dropped at the same time Grace’s gaze flew to mine. For a moment, one tiny moment, pure horror entered her eyes.

Oh God . . . the thought of spending a long drive with me makes her feel that way? The sick feeling in my stomach increased.

“My car will make it, Lena. It’s fine.” That formal tone entered Grace’s voice again.

Lena rolled her eyes. “No, it won’t. Get real, girl. You probably won’t even make it to the border.”

The sweat on Grace’s forehead increased. With trembling fingers, she pushed her hair behind her ears.

She really didn’t want to go with me, like really, *really* didn’t want me along. My stomach plummeted. Taking a deep breath, I resisted the urge to push to a stand and leave the room, but acting like a coward and running away would only make this entire situation even more pathetic.

Besides, Lena said Grace’s car was a pile of crap. There was no way I was going to sit back and let her drive off in a vehicle that could potentially break down, especially not on winter mountain roads.

I cleared my throat. “Why don’t you take my car? Like Lena said, it’s brand new, the tires are good, and it’s all-wheel drive, so you won’t have to worry about sliding off the road. If you take it, you won’t break down, and don’t worry, I don’t need to join you if you’d rather go alone.”

Grace’s breath hitched. Even though I sat two feet away, I still heard it. “You would loan me your car? Your *brand-new* car? You’d really do that?”

“Yeah, of course. Just take it. I’ll go get the keys right now.”

Lena clamped a hand on my forearm. “Just hold on a minute. Grace is *not* borrowing your car. That damn thing doesn’t even have door handles. I don’t even know how you get in and out of it, so how is Grace supposed to know? And isn’t it electric? How will she charge the battery?”

“It has door handles. You just have to—”

Lena gripped me harder, silencing me, before swinging back to her friend. “Do you really want to figure all that out, Grace? Just let him drive you. It will be so much easier, believe me. Raven will get you there and back in one piece.” Lena gave me side-eyes before winking.

I groaned inwardly. Apparently, Lena was playing matchmaker now too.

Grace twisted her hands again. “But my dad—”

Lena sighed. “I know I’ve never met your parents, but if you’re worried about bringing a boy home, don’t. Raven can crash at a motel or something, and you said your mom is sick, right? So you want to make sure you get there.”

“Um . . .” She bit her lip, toying with her full bottom lip. “I don’t know . . .”

Even though I hated the nervousness strumming from Grace like electric energy, I hated more the thought of her driving some crappy car and potentially breaking down in the mountains. No way in hell was I going to let that happen. Still, it was pretty obvious she didn’t want me along.

But I’d be damned if I did nothing, and she potentially got stranded.

Raking a hand through my hair, I said, “It’s all right, Grace. We can, um, listen to audiobooks or something on the drive. And like Lena said, I’ll drop you off and will crash at a motel. You don’t have to worry about your dad, and you won’t have to worry about charging my car.”

Grace inhaled a deep, shuddering breath. Warring emotions battled in her luminous eyes. Toying with her lip again, she finally replied, “Okay, that would work. Thanks, Raven.”

I nodded curtly before pushing to a stand. Even though my attempts at asking her out had blown up in my face, at least, I knew she’d get home safely, and then when we got back, I’d have to figure out a way to forget about her. Because as much as I wanted her—wanted her more than freakin’ anything—it appeared that feeling wasn’t mutual.

CHAPTER TWO

I pulled my sleek new Tesla up to the curb outside Grace's apartment. The old, rundown building sagged into the ground, like a neglected barn on an abandoned farm.

Similar to most college students, Grace didn't have a lot of money. Given where she lived, that was pretty obvious, and Lena had told me Grace was always counting her pennies. Even though Lena tried to pay for most of Grace's things, her best friend wouldn't let her.

A smile ghosted my lips. Grace had her pride. She didn't want handouts. I couldn't help but admire that, even though I wanted to buy her the world.

I groaned. *Take it easy, Raves. You're just giving her a ride. She doesn't want anything from you.*

Never mind that last night Lena had pulled me aside after my botched attempt to date Grace. She'd tried to convince me that Grace really *did* want to go on a date with me, but that Grace was just acting weird about this trip to her parents. But I'd seen Grace's reaction when I'd asked her. Whatever my family thought Grace felt for me, they'd obviously been wrong.

Scents from the coffees I'd bought floated up around me. I took a sip of mine, the dark brew hot with a hint of cinnamon. After setting it down, I nervously raked a hand through my hair, eyeing the coffee I'd bought Grace and the audiobooks I'd purchased.

Three digital audiobooks waited on my phone for Grace to choose from, thanks to the five hour drive ahead of us. Grace had given me her parents' address last night, and I had the entire route mapped out. We were headed to the mountains west of Casper, and if the drive went awkwardly, we could listen to books the entire way, anything to cover up the fact that she didn't want me along.

My palm settled on the smooth steering wheel, my fingers drumming against it. The clock on the dash read 6:59. I'd told Grace I'd pick her up at seven o'clock, so when her apartment door opened a moment later, just

when the clock shifted to 7:00, I wasn't surprised. Unlike Lena, Grace was always on time.

She gripped a small bag and her purse. Both dangled over her shoulder. A thick parka covered her upper half, sturdy snow boots on her feet. With her hood down, her long blond hair flew around her face in the breeze, and even though she smiled when she saw me, her lips seemed tight.

I took a deep breath, reminding myself that my job was only to drive her. Nothing more.

I hastily got out of the car. Cold wind blew against my face, and since I'd left my jacket in the back, a shiver hit me. When I rounded the vehicle, Grace stood outside of the front door, eyeing it skeptically.

"There really aren't door handles."

"There are. You just need to do this." I touched the handle, and it extracted from the car.

"Oh, right." She laughed, sounding self-conscious before she pulled her lip into her mouth, nibbling on it, as that alluring pink tongue darted out again.

I forced myself to look away. "Let me get your bag." I took the small bag from her, my hand brushing against her shoulder.

She tensed, even though her large parka created a protective barrier from direct contact with me. Still, I noticed her reaction. I stepped back, not wanting her to feel uncomfortable. "Just, uh, get yourself settled inside. Oh, and I picked us up coffees. I bought you a white-chocolate mocha."

Her gaze flew to mine, her large blue eyes as luminous as sapphires. "You did? That's my favorite coffee."

I already knew that, since Lena had told me last night when I'd asked her, but I feigned a look of surprise. "Oh, really? Well, I guess that was lucky."

Her face softened. "Thanks, Raven. That was really thoughtful of you."

"Yeah, no problem." I backed up. "Just, uh, get yourself settled and then we can get going." I rounded the back of the car, my heart beating like a drum.

When I slid into the driver's seat, Grace sat primly on the passenger side, her long legs angled toward the center with her hands clasped in her lap. A floral scent from her hair wafted my way.

Damn, she smelled good.

“I really appreciate you doing this, Raven. It’s pretty amazing that you’re willing to drive me there and back. It’s a long way.”

I tried to not be affected by the sound of her voice, the scent of her hair, and how her breasts lifted every time she took a breath, but my stomach still tightened, and something lower tightened too. I shifted in my seat. “It’s not a problem, really.”

She opened her mouth but then closed it. Running a hand through her hair, she looked out the window, nibbling on her lip again. I shifted into gear and pulled onto the road, picking up speed.

I drove us through the city to I-25. The entire way, Grace’s attention stayed on the passing scenery, a troubled look on her face, but anytime she caught me watching, she forced a smile.

“Do you want to listen to an audiobook?”

She rubbed her hands on her thighs. “We could. Is that what you want to do?”

I’d rather talk to you. “We can if you want.”

She rubbed her hands faster and shrugged. “Honestly, I’m not sure if I could pay attention enough to listen to a story.”

My brow furrowed as a light dusting of snow began to fly. “Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, totally fine.”

But her response was too quick, and she played with her nails before tilting her chin toward the window.

The silence around us stretched, and I couldn’t help but notice that the farther north we drove, the tenser she became. My initial worries over her hesitations about traveling with *me* disappeared more and more with every passing mile. Whatever we were driving toward seemed to terrify Grace, and it suddenly struck me that her mom was sick. Maybe she was *really* sick.

When we crossed the border into Wyoming, on our way toward Cheyenne, I draped my arm over the steering wheel, eyeing her again. “Grace? Are you sure everything’s okay? Because if it’s not, you can tell me. You know, if something’s going on with your family, I can listen if you want to talk.”

Her head whipped toward me, that terrified look growing. “Why would you think something’s going on with my family?”

“I . . . uh . . . I don’t. I just know that your mom’s sick, and that’s why you’re going home.”

Her fingers uncurled from where they’d balled into her palms. She smoothed back her hair. “Oh, my mother, of course.”

“When was the last time you visited?”

She blinked, looking down.

I waited for her to respond, but then wondered if she’d heard my question. I was about to ask it again, when she said, “I haven’t. Not since before college.”

My eyebrows rose. “Not even during the summer?”

“No.” She looked out the window again, clasping her hands tightly in her lap once more, before lunging for my phone. “So you said you bought audiobooks? What audiobooks did you buy? Maybe we should listen to one of those.”

She held out my phone for me to enter the passcode, and I wanted to kick myself as she picked the literary novel and hit play. *Nice one, Raven.* Obviously, she didn’t want to talk about her family, so the fact that I’d brought it up only made her more uncomfortable.

Neither of us said anything else until we drove into Wheatland where I had to stop to recharge the car’s battery. The audiobook droned on in the background, but I barely paid it any attention. I didn’t think Grace did either. She checked her phone a few times, continually nibbling her lip while staring out the window.

When I pulled up to the Tesla Supercharger outside of a hotel, I spotted a fast food restaurant down the road. “Do you want to grab some lunch while the battery’s charging?”

She frowned and picked up her purse. Her eyebrows drew together as she opened her wallet. “Um, sure. We can do that.”

Outside, the wind blew, howling at times. I quickly grabbed the charger and plugged my car in.

“Ready to go?”

Grace pulled her coat tightly around her, hugging her purse closely to her side. “Sure. I’ll follow you.”

The ease at which she’d laughed last night, when she’d been surrounded by my family and the babies had disappeared. Her gaze stayed down, her lips downturned, as we trudged the distance to the restaurant.

When we reached the fast food joint, I held the door open for her. It was only as she stepped through it, that troubled look still on her face, that she seemed to realize I'd opened the door for her.

She shook herself, a small smile lifting her lips. "Thanks, Raven."

I dipped my head, wanting so badly to place my hand against her waist, guiding her inside. Instead, I made sure to keep a foot of distance between us.

At the checkout counter, Grace looked through her wallet again.

"What do you want?" I asked.

She checked the menu before pulling out a few dollar bills, each bill crisp and pressed and aligned precisely in her wallet. "Um . . . a cheeseburger is fine."

I eyed the three dollar bills she held onto as if her life depended on it. As discreetly as possible, I looked at the other bills in her wallet. Only two dollars remained.

I slid my billfold from my back pocket and pulled out my credit card. "Do you like fries? Or do you want a drink?"

"I don't really like fries."

"Onion rings?"

A wistful expression crossed her face. "I love onion rings."

A bored looking teenager stood behind the counter, watching us while we spoke. I stepped closer to her. "Two cheeseburgers, a large fry, a large onion rings, and two sodas."

Grace bustled forward. "Raven, what are you doing? I can order for myself and pay for my food." She thrust her three dollars forward.

I gently pushed her hand back. "Put your money away."

She swallowed tightly, that troubled look returning as her fingers curled around the three dollars in her palm. "You don't need to pay for me, seriously. I tell Lena that all the time, but she's always picking up the bill too."

I gave her a crooked smile. "Then it must run in the family 'cause I'm not letting you pay either."

A soft laugh escaped her. She looked almost surprised at the sound, because she bit her lip again. "I hate that I never have any money."

"You're a college student. College students are notoriously broke."

"But you're a college student too."

“True, but I have a trust fund. My dad—” My brow furrowed as I cut myself off. I’d just referred to Conroy Fielding as my father, even though he wasn’t. Grace knew about Marcus Christenson, the man I’d grown up with that I’d considered my father until I’d learned about what he’d done to my mother and his role in O’Brien Pharmaceuticals, but Conroy, I’d only known him a few years.

I cleared my throat. “I mean, Conroy has given us all trust funds, as Lena’s told you. Don’t sweat the money. Seriously. I can afford to buy you lunch.”

“And you’re transporting me home,” she said quietly, under her breath. “I can pay you for gas then—” She slapped a hand to her forehead. “Except your car doesn’t take gas.”

I grinned and reached for our tray when the checkout girl handed it over. “Yep. Guess you’ll have to find something else you want to pay for.”

She laughed, a real laugh this time, some of the tension leaving her face. When we searched for a table, her steps seemed a little lighter, and that beautiful smile—that usually graced her face—lifted her lips. It was crazy how satisfying that was, to know that I’d helped shift her mood.

We sat down and ate quickly, since we still had a few hours left to drive, but just as I grabbed my coat and the tray to leave, Grace’s entire body went rigid. Her face paled, her gaze glued toward something by the door.

“Um, excuse me.” She flew out of the booth, heading toward the women’s restroom before I could blink.

Frowning, I glanced over my shoulder.

I surveyed the restaurant. One of the restaurant employees put together a bag of food for someone at the drive-thru. A mom with two young kids kept telling her children they couldn’t have ice cream, and two guys stood near the checkout counter, ordering lunch.

Nothing looked unusual.

Pushing to a stand, I dumped our tray and slid my jacket back on before pulling the slim mirror from my pocket. It was something I always carried. Opening it, I checked my contact lenses. Brown irises stared back at me. Good. My contacts were still in place.

A moment later, Grace rushed from the women’s restroom, keeping her head down. She headed straight for the door.

I hurried to catch up with her when one of the guys at the checkout counter cocked his head. “Grace? Grace Anderson?”

Grace stopped mid-stride, her hand gripping the door handle tightly. I paused, just around the corner from where she stood. Grace closed her eyes, her breath coming fast, before she turned stiffly. Her jaw locked when she faced them.

The two guys who’d been ordering at the counter had both turned. One wore a leering expression. The other eyed Grace up and down.

“It *is* you.” The taller one, with sandy blond hair and a dirty T-shirt said. He leaned his hip against the counter. “With so many clothes on, I barely recognized you.”

Tears sprouted in Grace’s eyes.

My hands balled into fists, anger rising in my gut when the other one laughed, but Grace just shrank back before shoving into the door and barreling through it.

The two guys continued to laugh after she ran. I curled my lip, the fire rising in my mind. With the flick of a thought, I could start them on fire.

But both guys turned back to the counter, still laughing, oblivious to the fact that I could roast them like barbeque. I took a deep breath, struggling to get myself under control, then rounded the corner and pushed through the double doors.

Outside, the wind cut into my skin like icy needles. Grace was already halfway back to the car.

Picking up a jog, I hurried to catch up with her. When I reached her side, she stood by the car’s door, breathing heavily with her eyes squeezed tightly shut.

“Grace?”

She jumped, a shriek escaping her lips. “Oh. Raven. I didn’t see you there.”

The wind whipped around, throwing her hair’s long thick tendrils around her face. An embarrassed flush tinted her cheeks, but she smiled, or tried to. The muscles quivered in her cheeks, her expression looking forced. “Is the car done charging?”

I frowned and glanced back at the restaurant, thinking of the douchebags who’d just humiliated her. My nostrils flared, the cold wind flowing into me. I was on the brink of turning back, of telling them exactly

what I thought of how they'd treated her, when Grace's hand shot out, grasping my arm.

"You heard, didn't you?"

The feel of her hand on my arm made me pause. Steely strength ran through her grip, her clenching fingers desperate.

"Yeah, I did."

Her chin dropped, her eyes closing again. "Can we go?" she asked quietly.

My stomach tightened, but not from nervousness. Seeing the absolute dejection on her face, and her complete humiliation and pain . . .

I wanted to step closer to her, wrap her up in my arms, and kiss away all of the hurt.

But I wasn't her boyfriend. I wasn't anyone important to her. I was just the guy giving her a ride, and that was it.

CHAPTER THREE

We pulled out of the charging station and merged back onto the interstate. Snow blew over the road like wispy clouds. We headed deeper into the mountains, as an overcast sky above illuminated the winding road that stretched progressively skyward.

“The weather can change on a dime out here.” Grace fiddled with her jacket’s zipper, her attention still out the window. “You can have four seasons in one day.”

I kept my hand on the steering wheel, but my gaze kept drifting her way. What those guys had said at the fast food joint still weighed heavily on my mind. “Did you grow up out here?”

She fiddled more with the zipper. “I spent my entire childhood in these mountains. I thought I’d never see them again.”

I gripped the wheel harder, wanting so badly to know what caused that catch in her voice. “So if you haven’t visited since before college, does that mean the last time you saw your parents was when you were eighteen?”

She wrapped her arms more tightly around her middle, her jacket making a crinkling sound. “I left before that.”

I frowned as we banked around a turn. All of this was new to me. Lena had told me a lot about Grace, knowing how much I was crushing for her, but she’d never mentioned anything about Grace never traveling home or that she’d left her parents’ house before beginning college. I wondered if Lena even knew that.

I slowed the Tesla, the road growing steeper and curvier. “If you left before you went to college, where did you go?”

Grace leaned forward, grabbing her purse from the floor. She pulled out her planner, a few color coded tabs sticking up from the top. Flipping it open, she extracted the pen latched to the side. “You know, I was thinking, I should keep track of what you’ve paid for on this trip and write it down. I can also keep track of the mileage and reimburse you per mile. I’d feel better if I paid my way.”

Her planner displayed lists on each page. Columns and charts, filled with her neat handwriting, made her stark organizational skills apparent. Even the lists were color coded, every dip and angle from her handwritten letters precise and clean.

I waited for her to answer my question, to tell me more about her life before she'd met Lena and my family, but her brow furrowed and she remained silent.

She held the planner up, concentrating on making her letters tiny and perfectly aligned, but I still caught how her fingers trembled, and when we hit a bump in the road, her pen waivered and a smudge of ink shot across the page.

"Shoot," she whispered. She pulled a bottle of whiteout from her purse, carefully applying it to the smudge.

I watched the painstaking process as she meticulously worked to make her planner as orderly and pristine as possible.

"Lena told me you were organized."

She applied another careful stroke of the whiteout. "I like things to be in order."

Lifting her pen again, she wrote tiny numbers, and with a start, I realized she'd already calculated how much her meal had cost at lunch, including the tax.

I gripped the wheel harder as she next grabbed her phone. She pulled up her maps app and figured out the mileage from Boulder to her parents' house.

My stomach twisted. "Grace? You don't need to pay me back. I don't care about the money. Please. Don't keep track of what I've bought you or how many miles I've driven. I just want to help you get home. I don't want anything in return."

When I said the word *home*, her movements stopped. Her finger hovered over her phone's screen as her mouth tightened. "But keeping track of things and paying close attention to how I spend money is necessary. It's how I've survived."

My frown deepened. *It's how I've survived.*

Survived. That was an interesting choice of words.

"Are you talking about after you left your parents? Or how you pay for things now while you're in college?"

With jerky movements, she stored her phone away before neatly aligning her planner back in her purse. Grabbing my cell phone, she held it out to me. “Should we finish that audiobook? We’ll be there in about an hour.”

Eyebrows knitting together, I begrudgingly entered my passcode, and the narrator’s voice again filled the cab. Grace settled back in her seat, her legs angled toward the window. She clasped her thin hands tightly in her lap, but her knee subtly jostled up and down, the movement tiny but noticeable.

As we wove deeper into the mountains, she clasped her hands harder and harder until the blue veins on the backs of her hands poked starkly out, reminding me of blue ropes, like a hangman’s noose waiting for an execution.

~ ~ ~

Early afternoon arrived when the GPS indicated our destination was only a mile away. Thick trees grew along the side of the road, their branches naked and bare in winter, only the thick pines’ foliage shone dark green. The rest of the land spread out before us, covered in white snow and broken up by jagged granite peaks.

I paused the audiobook, not being able to concentrate on the story anyway. Grace sat immobile, staring out the window. She didn’t seem to notice when I turned the book off.

“Are we close to your parent’s house?”

“It’s just up there.” Her voice came out in a hoarse whisper, her face pale.

I slowed the car on the narrow highway as an old metal mailbox appeared, poking out of a snowbank. The flag dangled from a broken screw. If the snowbank hadn’t supported the mailbox, propping it upright, I wouldn’t have been surprise if it tipped over. But one thing was apparent, it was the only mailbox out here.

“This is it.” Her knees pinched together as her gaze stayed trained ahead.

I pulled onto a snowy, single lane driveway that snaked through the trees. The packed snow didn’t make a sound as we trailed deeper into the

woods. Nobody else appeared to live out here. I hadn't seen another house for miles.

"Any neighbors close by?"

Grace sat up straighter but kept her attention forward. "The closest one is three miles west."

A moment later, the trees thinned and a small house appeared. Peeling paint flaked from the wooden clapboard siding, and a sloping porch hinted at neglect. Rusty junk surrounded the entire property, and an old empty bird feeder hung from a pole, teetering against a snow pile only a dozen feet away.

I rolled the car to a stop, the motor silent. "Is this it?"

Grace swallowed, her jaw tightening. An old screen door banged against the front door, the rickety movement caught in a never ending breeze. The faint *tap tap* from it came through the windows.

"This is it." Grace unlatched her seatbelt, her face pale and her hands trembling.

"Is it okay if I park here?"

Her movements stopped, her little tongue darting out to lick her lips. "You can just drop me off. If you can come back tomorrow, I'll be ready to go."

Before I could reply, she grabbed her purse and shot out the door. She hurried to the back of the car waiting for the trunk to open.

Reluctantly, I released it. With stiff arms, she retrieved her bag before slamming the trunk closed. On wooden-like legs, she walked carefully on the packed snow toward the front door. When her thin frame climbed the sagging steps, her hand clung tightly to her bags.

I didn't back out. I couldn't. It didn't feel right to leave her here, but when Grace reached the front door and twisted the door handle, she looked over her shoulder.

Even from the distance, her blue eyes shone wide and luminous. With a pinched mouth, she nodded up the road, indicating for me to go.

Nostrils flaring, I reversed and swung back around. Through the rearview mirror, I watched her. She stood in the open doorway, watching me, as if making sure that I left.

I knew that she didn't consider me her boyfriend and hadn't wanted me to come along on this trip, but something about all of this didn't feel right. It felt damned wrong.

When I pulled back onto the highway, a sick feeling rolled in my stomach. I made it about a mile down the road before I slammed on the breaks and did a u-turn.

CHAPTER FOUR

I pulled back into the driveway, the car crawling slowly up the single lane like a soldier sneaking across the battle line. The house appeared through the trees again, silent and still. Pulling forward, I parked by the old garage and cut the engine.

When I stepped out, the cold air cut through my lungs like a knife. Wind rushed through the towering trees, highlighting the vast silence. Only a few bird calls penetrated the breeze. My feet crunched into the snow as I walked to the front door. The creaking porch squeaked when my feet thudded softly on their swollen wooden treads.

At the front door, I raised my hand to knock but a sharp *thud* came from inside. I paused, my fist hovering over the door as I listened.

Another *thud* came, followed by a faint scream, then a man's muffled yell.

My pulse leaped. When the yelling continued, I didn't stop to knock. My hand grasped the door handle and wrenched it open. I flew into the small home, stopping momentarily when the scent of cigarette smoke assaulted me.

"What the hell?" a man yelled. He stood in the kitchen, visible through the cluttered living room I'd barreled into.

On the dirty kitchen floor lay Grace.

Blood trickled down the side of her mouth, her top lip already swelling as a bruise bloomed across her cheek.

The fire rushed up inside me, my anger making me want to burn everything in my path. He'd *hit* her. Within a second, I was at her side, kneeling down as she stared up at me with dazed eyes.

"Raven?" she croaked.

In the corner of the kitchen, huddled a feeble looking gray-haired woman. She had her hands over her ears as she cowered, curled up in the fetal position.

“Who the hell are you?” The man, who I could only assume was Grace’s father, loomed over us in his sweat-stained clothes. “Get the hell out of my house!”

I cradled Grace to me and stood. She clung tightly to my arms, her entire body trembling.

Her father advanced. I pushed Grace behind me, widening my stance in case he tried to swing at her again.

Her father stopped, his lip curling. Yellow teeth appeared. He pushed his greasy hair back before balling his hands into fists. We stood close to eye-level, but whereas his belly protruded from old age and too much alcohol, mine was flat and hard, thanks to the conditioning training I did daily with Jet and Jasper.

Being careful to keep Grace out of the way, I readied for a fight in case he started swinging. Her father looked down, eyeing my fisted hands.

Taking a step back, he grabbed a half-smoked cigarette from an ashtray on the kitchen table and took a drag. “Is this another one of your boyfriends, Grace?” He blew a cloud of smoke in my face. “You like sluts, is that it?”

I flinched. “She’s not a slut.”

He took another drag. “You sure about that?”

“Darren, don’t!” the woman wailed from the corner.

Grace’s father swung around, his meaty arms tightening. “Keep your mouth shut, woman!”

Grace’s mother curled into a ball again, her thin arms shielding her face.

Behind me, Grace gripped my shirt. Even though I stood in front of her, I felt her shaking. “I just want to see her,” Grace said, her voice pleading. “She’s sick, Dad. Please, let me see her.”

“She’s not sick!” Her father took a step toward Grace, but I shifted, blocking him. “She’s faking it, pretending to be sick so she doesn’t have to do any work around here, and I told you before—whores aren’t allowed under my roof so you best get out.”

“But she’s sick!”

His jaw tightened, his jowls jiggling with the movement. He paused, his head cocking. A moment passed before he asked in a low voice, “How did you know she was sick anyway?” He swung toward Grace’s mother

again. “Did you call her? Is that what you did? Told your little girl to rush home because you don’t feel well?”

Grace’s mom curled more into herself, not making a sound.

Grace peeked her head out from around me, but she still held onto my shirt, her hands staying on my waist as though I was the only thing that kept her father from knocking her out. “Please, dad! Please! Just let me take her with me. Let me take her to the hospital.”

Her father rounded on us again. My pulse leaped, and my heart drummed in my chest. I shot my arm out when he made a move to grab his daughter.

Smirking, he pulled back. “Your mother’s not going anywhere, Grace.” He met my gaze, blowing smoke from his cigarette again. “Why don’t you take this hussy back where you found her, pretty boy? Sluts aren’t allowed under my roof.”

~ ~ ~

I kept my arm around Grace, making sure to keep distance from her father while I helped her out the front door. She didn’t say a word, but she held onto me, her legs giving way on the porch steps.

Supporting her weight, I wrapped my arm protectively around her shoulders and got her in the car. She folded into the front seat, her legs and arms stiff, and she didn’t protest when I buckled her seat belt.

When I stood and slammed her door, I felt someone watching me. Swinging around, I made eye contact with her father again. He stood in the doorway, watching us from the porch while taking drags from his cigarette. A cardinal trilled from one of the trees, the serene winter bird song completely out of place at this hellacious home.

I had no idea where Grace’s mother waited—perhaps still cowering in the kitchen corner, perhaps peeking through the window in the living room—but I knew she wasn’t safe here.

I debated going back inside to try and retrieve her, but I felt fairly certain Grace’s father and I would come to blows if I did that, and right now, my concern was for Grace. I needed to get her out of here.

Locking my jaw, I slid into the driver’s seat and backed out. Grace sat immobile, her body slumped to the side, as I drove us back to Casper.

It took forty-five minutes to reach town. I stopped at the first hotel I found and booked a room. Grace didn't seem aware of me helping her out of the car and up the stairs as winter wind blew around us.

Once inside, she sat on the bed. It was only then I saw the silent tears streaming down her cheeks.

"She's sick, Raven. Really sick, and he won't do anything to help her." She covered her face with her hands as silent sobs shook her shoulders.

My stomach rolled in anger. I'd never seen Grace like this before. Not broken or helpless. Never like this. She'd always been cheerful and kind, alert and on top of things. I couldn't remember her ever *not* helping Lena, taking care of my sister at times since Lena could be so erratic and disorganized.

But the Grace I saw now, the Grace who sat before me, was a shell of the beautiful woman I'd been falling in love with for the past six months. This Grace was broken and battered, and I hated the man who'd done that to her.

I crouched in front of her. "Do you know what's wrong with your mom?"

Another tear rolled down her cheek. "Cancer. My mom managed to sneak out a few weeks ago, when my father was gone on a hunting trip. She went to the hospital. They did scans and blood tests. She has stage two cancer, an aggressive kind, but he won't let her get treatment. She called me yesterday afternoon to tell me goodbye and said she wanted to see me one last time before she died, because she knew the cancer was going to kill her."

She sobbed again, silently, making me wonder how many years of practice she had at undetected crying.

I brushed my finger across her cheek, not even realizing I was touching her until I felt her hot flesh. A nasty purple bruise bled just below the surface of her skin, ready to bloom upward and let the whole world know that someone had hit her.

"I have makeup to cover that up." She sniffed and wiped the tears away. "I came prepared."

My jaw locked. "Did he hit you a lot growing up?"

She licked her lips, wincing when her tongue grazed the cut on her upper lip. "All the time."

My stomach squeezed, and I made myself take deep steadying breaths, because all I wanted to do at that moment was go back to that god awful house, get her mother out, and then burn her father alive in that hellhole before razing the property to the ground.

Grace covered her face with her hands. “I’m sorry, Raven. I’m so sorry I dragged you into this. It’s why I didn’t want you to come.”

I gently pulled her hands away, pushing another lock of hair behind her ear. “Don’t be sorry. I’m really glad I’m here. I hate the thought of you doing this alone, and I really hate the thought of what that bastard could have done to you.”

She caught my hand, her fingers threading through mine, but then her breath caught, as if realizing what she’d done. When she made a move to pull back, I squeezed her hand, keeping it in mine.

“I want to be here with you, right now. There’s nowhere else I’d rather be.”

She met my gaze, tears shining in her eyes. “But how . . .” She licked her lip, then grimaced before fingering the swollen flesh of her upper lip. “But how can you want that? After what you saw? After what you heard?”

I grabbed the plastic bag that I’d filled with ice when we first entered the room and held it up to her swollen mouth and cheek. “Do you really think I’m that shallow? That I only wanted to ask you out because I liked how you looked?”

She flinched, looking down. “A lot of guys have only liked how I looked. They don’t want to hear about all the other stuff, the not so pretty stuff that comes along with being with me.”

Shame filled her words, and I swallowed tightly, remembering the guys in the fast food restaurant and how her father had called her a slut. I had no idea what Grace had done in her past or who she’d been with, but I still loved her, and I knew enough to know that she was more than an abused girl with a troubled history who apparently tried to hide all of that ugliness from the world.

If there was one thing I’d learned since joining Lena, Flint, Di, and everyone else in my family, it was that when you chose to love someone, you loved all of them, not just the pretty parts.

“Were those guys back at the fast food joint guys you dated in the past?”

She took the bag of ice from me and held it to her cheek. “No. They recognized me from . . . somewhere else.”

I swallowed, my nostrils flaring as I remembered how they’d humiliated her. “Somewhere else?”

She squeezed her eyes tightly shut before reaching for her bag. “You know it’s probably better if we don’t talk about this. I have a few things I need to schedule next week anyway, and I should check my work shifts to make sure I have the right dates and times. It’s really important to always stay on top of—”

“Grace?” I took her trembling hands into mine, pushing her purse away. “It’s okay. You can tell me what happened. I won’t judge you.”

She turned rigid, her gaze staying on the floor, but she dropped her planner and didn’t try to find anything else inside her carefully organized purse—a purse that contained all of the details about her perfectly controlled life.

It all made sense now.

Her rigid structures. Her immaculately planned agendas. A girl who had grown up in a broken home, where nothing was safe or structured, and who didn’t know when she’d be hit or battered next, wanted order and routine in her life.

She wanted to control what happened around her, because she’d never had any control.

“Grace? It’s okay.”

She kept her eyes tightly closed and swung her head back and forth. “It’s not okay. If you knew the truth, Raven, you wouldn’t want anything to do with me. I never wanted you to know about any of this, because if you did, you’d run.”

I gripped her harder, running my fingers along the backs of her hands. “I wouldn’t run, Grace. Please believe me. I won’t ever run from you.”

Unshed tears pooled in her eyes. “You would.”

“No,” I said in a firm voice. “I wouldn’t.”

She hung her head, a tear slipping out.

I moved to sit beside her and placed an arm around her shoulders, pulling her closer to me. Her floral scent wafted into my nose, and her thin shoulders folded inward under my hand. I wanted so badly to hold her and protect her, anger again rising up in me that someone had hurt her.

“Please tell me,” I said quietly.

She took a deep shuddering breath. A long moment passed, and I thought for sure she wasn't going to tell me anything, but then she said quietly, "I moved out when I was sixteen. I couldn't take the beatings anymore, or how my dad hurt my mom so much. I tried to get her to come with me, but she said he'd kill her if she left, and she was probably right. He *would* kill her. So my mom and I saved money, hiding it from my dad. It wasn't a lot, but it was enough for me to get out of there and find a cheap place to live. I rented a room with a family in Casper and moved schools, working most nights and on the weekends to pay my bills. I thought I was doing okay. My grades were pretty good, and I was getting by. But then a few months went by, and I ran out of funds. My mom sent money when she could, but it was hard to sneak it from my dad without him noticing, and the part-time job I had just wasn't cutting it."

A tear fell onto her cheek, but she kept her gaze down, not looking at me. "And then I met this girl who told me you could make a lot of money really easily if you . . ." She squeezed her eyes tighter. "If you danced at this club she worked at. So I got a job there and started dancing on the weekends. It was better for school. I didn't have to work weekdays anymore, and I made a lot of money fast. But then—" She took another deep breath. "Then guys around town started recognizing me and rumors started. It got back to my dad that I was dancing for money, except the rumors got worse, and people started saying I was doing more than just dancing."

She shook her head, her words turning bitter. "And then one day, my dad showed up at my door. He forced his way inside and beat me so hard I couldn't walk for two days. He told me that I was never allowed back home, that I'd shamed him and my mom by being a whore."

She blinked rapidly, but the unshed tears fell from her eyes. "But I never did that. Not once! I was a stripper throughout the rest of my high school years, but as soon as I got accepted into college at Boulder, I left that life behind me, and I haven't looked back. I haven't danced since I was eighteen, and I never want to do that again. I'd rather die than do that again."

A deep, uneven breath lifted her shoulders. She kept her face down, her chin quivering. "And I totally understand if you want nothing to do with me now. I'm not clean, Raven. I'm tainted and broken. You deserve someone better than me."

“You’re wrong, Grace. It doesn’t change how I feel about you at all.” I gripped her shoulders tighter. “It only makes me angry that your parents did that to you. You never should have been put in that position. You shouldn’t have had to sell your body to pay for housing and food. Your parents should have taken care of you.”

Her lip quivered, another tear falling onto her cheek. “You really don’t think of me any differently?”

“No.” I squeezed her more. “Not at all. If anything, I admire you. You’ve come so far even though you’ve been through hell and back. You’re incredible. I don’t know how you don’t see that.”

She began crying in earnest then and sagged into me. I wrapped my arms around her, loving the feel of her body against mine and the soft way she melted in my arms. But my anger didn’t abate. Rage poured through my veins at what her father had done, but I kept it firmly bottled inside me so she wouldn’t sense it.

I smoothed back her hair and ran my hand up and down her back. She shivered and tucked her head under my chin.

“I think you’re incredible too,” she said softly. “I’ve always thought that, but I thought you didn’t like me that way.”

I scoffed, nearly choking. “Are you kidding me? I’ve been trying to work up the guts to ask you out for six months.”

“You have?”

I laughed, then groaned. “If you only knew.”

She laughed quietly, but then moaned and fingered her lip. Another drop of blood came away on her fingertip. Her laugh stopped as she stared at the crimson bead. “But what about my mom? I can’t leave her with him. He’ll let her die.”

My jaw locked as my hand moved up and down her back. “Then we’ll go get her. We won’t leave her there.”

“But how? He’ll kill her if she leaves. I know he will. Otherwise, she would have run away with me when I was sixteen.”

The fire swirled inside me, my anger making it hotter. “We’ll find a way.”

CHAPTER FIVE

The sound of running water came from the bathroom as Grace showered. Even though it was early evening, fatigue had lined her face. I'd encouraged her to shower and settle in for an early night, and considering she hadn't argued, it seemed she agreed.

I paced our small hotel room, the constant trickling water in the background. I'd promised Grace we'd find a way to help her mom, and I intended to keep that promise. Now, it was a matter of figuring out *how* we helped her, but to do that, I needed my family.

I pulled out my cell phone and called Di, my pace increasing. She answered on the second ring.

"Raven, how's the weekend going?" She sounded cheerful and optimistic, neither traits I equated with my big sister, which meant she was anxious about how things were going for me.

"Not good, but it's not why you think." I explained as quickly as possible what had happened at Grace's house, and how she'd kept her abusive past hidden from all of us, including Lena. However, I didn't divulge that she'd been an erotic dancer. I wasn't sure if Grace wanted anyone else knowing that.

"She moved out when she was sixteen, and her father beat her growing up?" Di's voice tightened. "Are you serious? That bastard!"

"I know. Trust me, I know. I'm trying to keep control of myself right now because all I want to do is burn that motherfucker."

"You can't, Raven. You need to keep your power a secret."

"I know. I didn't say I was going to do anything. I just want to."

"So where's her mother at right now?"

"Still at their home. Last I saw her, she was huddled in the kitchen corner. I imagine her dad beat her after we left, because Grace's father learned that she contacted Grace and told Grace she was sick. He'd forbidden her from doing that."

A sound of disgust came from Di. “We need to get her mom out of there. Have you called the police?”

“No. Grace won’t let me. She said her father would kill her mother if she went to the authorities, and given what I saw today, I believe it.”

“Where are you right now?

“Some hotel in Casper.” I grabbed a hotel pen from the desk and read off the hotel’s name. “*We* need to get her mom out of there, if you know what I mean.”

Her voice turned grim. “If the police aren’t an option, and Grace is certain her father will kill her mother if she tries to leave, then you may be right. I’ll call an emergency family meeting right now. You can expect at least a few of us up there by tonight. We’ll figure something out. Just don’t go anywhere, okay?”

The shower turned off, leaving the room quiet. Grace would probably be out in a few minutes. “I won’t. We’ll stay here.”

“Good. We’ll see you soon.” With that, she hung up.

~ ~ ~

“I don’t think I can eat.” Grace picked at the pizza I’d ordered for dinner. We sat cross-legged on the bed, a pizza box open in front of us. Canadian bacon and pineapple covered the large pie, the doughy fragrance filling the room. “But thanks for ordering my favorite toppings.”

“That’s okay. We can always save it. If you change your mind, you can have it later.”

She nodded solemnly, and I stowed the remaining pieces on a paper plate before placing them in the mini-fridge.

Damp hair trailed in soft tendrils down Grace’s back as she picked at a thread on the bedspread. The bruise on her cheek bloomed darker, and her lip puffed outward, still swollen, but it was better than it had been previously, thanks to the ice.

“Is your family really coming up here to help?”

It was on the tip of my tongue to correct her and say *our* family, but I didn’t. Even though I considered Grace part of our family, she still had an estranged blood family and a mother that she wanted desperately to help.

“Yeah. Di, Flint, Lena, Jet, Jasper, and Edgar are all coming. They should be here any minute.”

Grace stopped picking at the thread and wrapped her arms around herself. “Do you really think they can help my mom?”

I thought of the twins’ ability to manipulate thought patterns, how Edgar could control minds if he chose too, Flint’s strength and speed, and Lena’s ability to harness auras from living things and turn those auras into workable energy. “Yeah. I’m pretty sure they can help.”

A sharp knock came on the door. Grace jumped, a look of terror filling her face. I placed my hand on her knee. “Don’t worry. It’s probably just them.”

She grabbed my hand, her grip clawing into me. “What if it’s my dad?”

The knock came again.

I squeezed her gently. “I’ll check before I answer.” I strode to the door and called loudly, “Who is it?”

“The asshole exterminators.” Jet’s muffled response came through the door.

Grace’s tense lips relaxed, and her mouth curved upward in a smile before she laughed softly.

I unlocked the door and swung it open. A burst of winter air blew into the room. Outside, snow flew through the dark night sky.

Lena barreled inside, her long curly red hair flying behind her. The second Grace saw her, Grace burst into tears.

Lena whipped off her jacket, throwing it to the floor. She had her arms around Grace, pulling her into a fierce hug, before I could blink. The two best friends hugged tightly, and Grace’s head dipped as she buried her face in Lena’s shoulder.

“I didn’t even know!” Lena squeezed her eyes shut. “Oh my gosh, Grace. How come you didn’t tell me? How come I never knew about this? I’m so sorry that you went through all of that!”

Grace clung to her as the rest of my family entered the room. I closed the door behind them, engaging the lock. Everyone wore winter coats, and each slid them off, throwing them on the free bed.

Flint and the twins’ large builds filled up the space. Each of my brothers wore angry or indignant expressions.

“Where’s dear old dad?” Jet asked as Lena continued to murmur things to Grace.

“Still at the house Grace grew up in,” I replied.

Di crossed her arms. She wore a thick black sweater and black skinny jeans. Her gaze narrowed when she got a look at the bruise on Grace's face. "Good thing you got her out when you did."

Edgar hung near the door, a nervous expression on his face. Considering he'd chosen to join us, I could only assume he intended to help.

I clapped him on the shoulder, offering him a smile. All he managed was a curt nod. I wasn't surprised. The last time he'd used his mind control powers had been six months ago to help Jacinda and Luke rescue their babies from Albert Darlington, and it had taken two months before he started acting somewhat normal again. I hoped whatever was to come wouldn't be a repeat of his regression.

"Thanks for coming," I said to him.

Edgar dipped his shaved head and shoved his hands into his pockets. "Grace deserves to be treated better."

My jaw tightened, the fire inside me building again. "She certainly does."

Flint, the twins, Di, Edgar, and I all stepped out of the room to give Lena and Grace some privacy. "Are you guys staying here for the night?" I asked in the frigid cold outside.

"We might as well book rooms. I imagine we won't do anything until tomorrow." Flint pulled out his wallet. "Lena and I can share a room."

"I'll room with his ugly mug," Jasper hooked a thumb at his brother.

Jet laughed.

"And I'll room with Di," Edgar said, still wearing that apprehensive expression.

The six of us headed for the check-in counter. Everyone booked rooms and got their keys. By the time we returned to the room I shared with Grace, nearly twenty minutes had passed.

I grasped the door handle, then paused. It suddenly occurred to me that Grace may prefer to share a room with Lena, feeling more comfortable with her best friend than me. My heart sank. As much as I wanted to be with Grace, be close to her and keep her safe, that may not be what *she* wanted.

Vowing to ask her before everyone turned in for the night, I slid my room key through the card reader as snow danced around us.

I opened the door to see Grace and Lena on the bed, facing one another and holding hands. Blotchy skin lined Grace's cheeks, but a smile lifted her

lips. A laugh came next after Lena said something quietly.

Just the sight of Grace's returning joyfulness created a lightening inside me. Never had I felt so grateful for Lena than I did at that moment.

"Hey," Grace said when she saw me. The six of us shuffled inside, closing the door behind us.

My heart beat harder at the sound of her voice. "Hi. How are you feeling?"

"A little better."

Jet and Jasper launched themselves onto the bed by Grace and Lena, bouncing it. Grace giggled again, but Lena swatted Jet in the arm. "You trying to bounce us off?"

Jet raised his hands in surrender. "Who? Me?"

Grace laughed again, but her gaze strayed back to me. She smiled in my direction.

My heart beat harder.

"All right, let's all take a seat and figure out what we're going to do." Di pulled out the chair by the small desk. Flint and Edgar took the other queen bed, Flint's dark eyes twinkling when he caught Lena's attention. Outside, the wind continued to howl.

"So your main concern is that your dad will kill your mom if she tries to leave?" Di asked bluntly, getting right to the point.

Grace sobered, her smile vanishing. "Um . . ." She took a deep breath. "Yeah. I know he'll kill her."

Flint leaned back on his elbows. "So we basically need to get her out of there alive and keep your dad from coming after her."

Grace nodded. "I know if my mom could leave safely, she would, but she's too terrified of my father."

"So that's easy," Jasper chipped in. The dark-haired, blue-eyed twin sat up straighter on the bed by Lena. "We manipulate his thoughts so he doesn't get aggressive, your mom leaves, and boom, problem solved."

Di arched a midnight brow. "But how do we keep him from trying to find her *after* we leave?"

Edgar swallowed, his Adam's apple bobbing. "I can help with that."

The entire room fell silent. Grace's hand came to her throat, her eyes moistening again. "You would really do that, Edgar? For me?"

Edgar dipped his head. "Of course I would, Grace. You're family."

I squeezed Edgar's shoulder from where I stood near the wall, as another tear slipped onto Grace's cheek. Lena grabbed her hand, and Grace's head dipped, her chin quivering. "I don't know how to thank you all. I . . ." Grace sniffed. "For so long, I've been on my own. I've never really had a family to support me, not really."

Lena rubbed her hand, and I came to her side, sitting beside her. I placed an arm around Grace's shoulders. "We'll be your family. For as long as you'll have us."

She lifted her shining eyes, filled with unshed tears. "I'll take you forever."

My stomach tightened, my heart beating erratically. While I knew she was probably referring to my entire family and not just *me*, I couldn't stop my hopeful feeling. With her large luminous eyes, bruised cheek, and swollen lip, she looked so vulnerable. I vowed then and there to protect her for the rest of my life. As long as she wanted me, I wasn't going anywhere.

~ ~ ~

"All right then." Di stood from her chair after we'd worked out the details of how we'd approach the house and get Grace's mom out. "We should probably all turn in since we're heading over there first thing in the morning." She nodded toward Grace, whose eyes kept drifting closed as she leaned into my shoulder. Even though it was only nine o'clock, it was obvious Grace was exhausted.

Di didn't need to say anything else. Everyone stood and slipped into their coats.

I nudged Grace gently, wanting so badly to stay with her, but wanting more to do what was best for her. "Did you want me to stay with you tonight, or would you prefer Lena? I can room with Flint if you want."

Grace lifted her head, her eyes hooded.

God, she's so beautiful.

"I . . ." She licked her lips. Thankfully, another round of ice had reduced her swollen lip even more. "I'd rather stay with you."

My chest swelled, my heart thumping.

"And that's our cue to leave." Jasper made a motion toward the door. "Come on, guys and gals, give these two some room."

Grace's cheeks flushed. She gave Lena a hug goodbye, then the door latched with a click behind everyone. Finally, we were alone in the room.

Nervously, I swallowed, feeling like a teenager. Rubbing the back of my neck, I hoped she wouldn't detect how jittery I felt. I'd been with women before, something my family didn't know about, but I'd never been with a woman who I loved. And the effect that was having on me nearly did my head in, but I wasn't so stupid to believe tonight would come to anything. Grace had been attacked today. Sex was probably the furthest thing from her mind.

I waved at the bed by the window. "I can take that one if you want."

Grace stepped closer to me. She lifted her luminous eyes and placed her hands on my abdomen. My heart pounded at the soft feel of her. "I'd rather sleep next to you."

Um . . . or not.

My mouth went dry. Her shoulders rose and fell with every breath, a questioning look in her eyes, as her breasts strained against her shirt. My stomach tightened, and I cleared my throat, trying to stop how aroused I was getting. I knew she probably wanted me to hold her and nothing more than that, but damn, that would be hard. I'd been fantasizing about her for months.

"Yeah, okay," I managed.

We both changed and got ready for bed. Grace's slim legs kept demanding my attention as we brushed our teeth, but she winced a few times when she jarred her cheek, and that was enough to stop my meandering thoughts.

But when she left the bathroom to pad back to the bed, a view of her shapely legs and backside shone in the mirror. In short shorts, and a long-sleeved top, she looked sexy as hell. Her legs looked like they went on forever, and with her long blond hair drifting down her back, and her pert breasts visible through her top when she turned to slip under the covers. . .

Another burst of arousal shot through me.

I forced a ragged breath. *Deep breaths, Raves. Deep breaths. Now is not the time to make a move.*

She switched off the light and waited for me. When I slid in next to her, she scooted over, giving me room.

I took that as a hint that she only wanted to sleep. Still, her scent lingered near my pillow and the warmth from her body beckoned me. I

fisted my hands, making myself stay still.

Rustling came from her side, then her soft voice. “Raven?”

“Yeah?”

“Do you want to come closer?”

Hell yeah. I cleared my throat. “Is that what you want? I don’t want to pressure you.”

A moment passed, and my stomach tightened again.

“Yes. That’s what I want.”

I moved closer to her, the mattress dipping under my weight, then pressed my body flush against hers. I tried to stop my erection, but the feel of her pressed against me, and her floral scent that made my head spin . . .

“Shit,” I whispered.

“What’s wrong? Are you okay?”

I shifted an inch back, hoping she didn’t feel just how *okay* everything felt. I cleared my throat. “Yeah. Totally fine.”

She rolled over to face me. In the dim light, penetrating the curtains from the parking lot, her eyes looked dark. “Is it okay that we’re sharing a bed?”

“Is it okay?” I scoffed. “Um, yeah, it’s more than okay.”

She dipped her head, suddenly looking shy. “Did you mean it when you said you’ve been wanting to ask me out for six months?”

“I meant it.”

Her lips parted, and her sweet breath puffed toward me.

My erection tightened more. “I just don’t want to pressure you. I’m trying so hard right now to not be turned on.”

She pulled her lower lip into her mouth, and that damned little tongue poked out to lick her lips, tormenting me again.

“I’ve never felt pressured by you,” she whispered. “I feel so safe with you, Raven.”

I swallowed tightly, that declaration meaning more to me than a hundred blow jobs. “Good. I want you to feel safe with me. I would never hurt you.”

“I know.” She glanced up, her gaze dipping to my lips.

My heart pounded harder.

“Which is why I want to do this.” She pressed her body against mine again, her lips finding my mouth.

For a brief second, I pulled back. “Your injuries—”

“I don’t care.” She threaded her fingers through the hair at the nape of my neck, kissing me more.

I tried to be gentle, but her tongue found its way into my mouth, and her scent flooded my senses.

I pulled her tighter to me. She moaned, and my hands roamed up and down her back, relishing every soft curve and smooth muscle. Her arms entwined around me, her fingers lightly caressing my back, sending tingles down my spine.

“Raven,” she whispered. Another moan came from her.

I threaded my fingers through her hair, the texture soft and thick. She tasted so freakin’ good, better than I’d dreamed of.

She shifted, the mattress dipping, and my erection sprang forward, pushing against her. When I realized that happened, I went rigid.

“Shit.” I pulled back, my hands shaking I wanted her so badly. “I’m sorry. I meant for this to be gentle and slow. I didn’t want to rush you. I wanted to—”

“Raven. It’s okay. You’re not rushing me, and we’re not doing anything I don’t want to do.”

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure.”

I pulled her closer to me again, loving the feel of her soft breasts pushed against my chest. I pressed my lips against her neck, inhaling her scent. “I’ve been wanting to do this for forever.”

She shivered. “Me too.”

I growled and nipped her skin, loving how that elicited another shiver from her. “But I mean it that I don’t want to rush you. I want to take this slow and get to know all of you before we—” I let my sentence hang.

Her head dipped, and if I didn’t know better, a flush stained her cheeks. “That’s fine, cause I’ve never, um . . . I mean, plenty of guys tried to sleep with me, but I’ve never actually . . . done it.”

My eyebrows shot to my hairline. “You’re a virgin?”

She cringed. “Don’t bring it up. Please. I just couldn’t, not with other guys, after . . .” Her tone dropped, her voice quieter. “Those two years when I danced, they really messed me up for a while. I didn’t trust anyone, and I didn’t want to throw myself at a guy just ’cause he gave me attention, so I just—” She shrugged. “I don’t know. I kinda shut myself off from men. I

think it was a survival instinct, like it was the only way I knew how to protect myself."

I tilted her chin up and brushed a finger across her uninjured cheek, my movement tender. "You're quite possibly the most incredible woman I've ever met. You don't need to feel embarrassed, Grace. You never need to feel embarrassed with me. I love it that I'll be your first." *And hopefully, your last.*

Her chin quivered. "Why are you so good to me?"

"Because you deserve nothing less." I pulled her into the crook of my arm, loving the feel of her against me. "I want to make you mine, and I intend to after this all blows over, if you'll let me."

"I'd love that, Raven. You're the first man I've ever wanted."

"Good. 'Cause I'm not letting you go."

CHAPTER SIX

I fell asleep to the feel of Grace's hair tickling my chin, and the sound of her soft breath puffing against my neck. I couldn't believe how lucky I was. That a girl as amazing as her wanted me.

Dreams filled my sleep that night of a beautiful woman wrapped in an ugly world. I wanted to save her and cherish her. Her lips were like raspberries, tender and sweet. I wanted to kiss them and suck on them, never letting her go.

A shrill sound penetrated my dream, those juicy lips fading. A phone was ringing, then a frantic voice, then someone shaking me.

"Raven! Raven wake up!"

But those sweet lips in my dream called to me and begged me to stay asleep.

"Raven!"

The yell jolted me upright. Grace's soft hands wrapped around my shoulders, her jumbled words penetrating the darkness.

"My mom! My mom just called! She's leaving! Hurry! We need to pick her up!"

Before I could process any of what she was saying, she was bounding out of bed, throwing her clothes on and searching for her jacket. "Hurry, Raven! We need to go!"

I flipped the light on by the bed, rubbing my eyes, my brain still thick from sleep. "Go? Now?"

"Yes! Now! She's running away on foot. We need to find her!"

Her panicked words penetrated the fog in my mind. Pushing myself upright, I slid out of bed and grabbed my clothes from yesterday. Grace was already at the door opening it when I stumbled out after her.

A bitterly cold night assaulted us. A pitch black sky covered a vast ceiling of nothingness above as snow flew in the parking lot lights. I hefted the collar of my coat up and made sure Grace got into the passenger side of my car before dashing around to the driver's seat.

Her chattering teeth greeted me when I slid inside.

“Hurry, Raven. Please hurry.” She sounded close to tears.

I started my car, turned the heater on full blast, and backed out. “It’s okay. We’ll find her.”

Grace covered her face with her hands. “What if she freezes to death? She said she was only grabbing a jacket because she had to hurry. She was too afraid my dad would wake up and find her if she took clothes from the dresser, so she’s still in her pajamas and walking alone at night. Someone could hit her on the road. It’s slippery and dark, and then—”

“We’ll find her.” I placed my hand over hers and squeezed. “Can you call her again? See where she is right now?”

“No. She had to leave her cell phone behind. My dad tracks her movements, so if she took it, he’d know where she was.” She clung to me, her thin fingers digging into mine.

I let her hold my hand while we drove out of town, heading west toward the mountains, the car’s headlights cutting through the snow like a tunnel.

The late hour, slippery roads, and pitch black surroundings made for a tumultuous drive as I did my best to keep Grace calm while keeping the car in our lane. Nobody else ventured on the roads, luckily, but patches of black ice meant I couldn’t drive too fast for fear I’d lose control.

It occurred to me twenty minutes into the drive that I should call my family and tell them what had happened. I called Di first, then Flint. Neither answered. Next, I tried Lena, Edgar, and the twins. Nothing.

Their ringers are probably off. Most of us slept with our phones on silent. *Shit.* But I kept my concerns to myself. The last thing Grace needed was something else to worry about.

“What if we don’t find her in time? What if he finds her first?” Grace asked the questions over and over, not hearing my responses and reassurances.

My heart pounded, my teeth grinding. The fire rose in me again as my rage burned.

With each mile that passed, the snow grew heavier. Even though Grace clung to my hand like a lifeline, I had to pull back and put both hands on the steering wheel as the narrow highway curved. I anxiously eyed the car’s battery again and again. We were running dangerously low on battery juice.

Flying snow filled the windshield, but we both kept our eyes peeled the closer we got to Grace's childhood home. About two miles away from it, Grace jumped in her seat, pointing through the windshield. "There she is!"

A figure walked slowly and stiffly on the side of the road, thin pajama pants billowing around her legs. A hood covered her face, but from her thin frame and folded posture, I knew it was Grace's mother.

I pulled over, and we jumped out. The bitter wind cut into my face like a thousand needles. Using the car's headlights to illuminate the side of the road, we raced on unsteady legs toward her, both of our arms out for balance as we tried not to fall.

"Mom?" Grace grabbed her in a hug when she reached her. "Mom? Are you okay?"

Grace's mother groaned, and she stood stiffly, her arms staying at her sides. Her teeth chattered as the wind howled. Blue lips caught my attention when she lifted her chin. The woman was freezing to death.

"G . . . Gr . . . Graaaace?" she managed through her chattering teeth.

My breath sucked in when the headlights revealed her features. Dried blood and fresh bruises covered her face. One eye was swollen completely shut.

"Yeah, it's me, Mom. It's really me." Grace put her arm around her mother, but her mother struggled to stay upright. She'd already been out in the cold for at least an hour, and her body refused to bend, not to mention, she'd taken a horrific beating. It was amazing she'd been able to walk at all.

"He'll kill me, Grace, if he gets to me."

Grace squeezed her shoulders gently. "I know, Mom. We won't let that happen, but come on, we need to get out of here."

Her mom took a step, hobbling, and nearly fell.

"Let me carry her." I moved to her mom's other side.

When I scooped her into my arms, she cried out, making me wonder if she had more injuries than just a battered face. I walked carefully down the side of the road to the car, my shoes slipping at times on the icy road.

Grace murmured soothing words and calm reassurances to her mother over and over, tears making her voice thick. "You can come live with me in Colorado, Mom. You can stay at my apartment, and we'll be able to spend time together again. We don't need to be afraid anymore. He can't hurt us now, and we—"

The sound of a revving engine cut through the night. A huge truck rounded the bend in the road farther up the mountain, no more than a half-mile away. It fishtailed around the corner like an out of control racecar.

"Oh no! Heeee's . . ." Her mother's teeth chattered. "Heeeee's here!"

The truck straightened out and gunned toward us, racing down the mountain at a frightening pace, oblivious to the treacherous roads and the fact that if he didn't stop, he'd run into and kill all of us.

"Run, Raven!" Grace grabbed my arm, propelling me faster down the mountain.

We ran side by side, the angry growl from her father's truck growing louder by the second. Headlights cut through the air behind us. My heart leaped into my throat, and I knew we'd made a mistake.

We should have woken my family before we left.

We should have brought them with us.

We shouldn't have done this alone.

But in our haste, we hadn't thought ahead. We'd come on our own, and now we were alone on a mountain with a crazed madman barreling down on us in his monstrous truck.

"Get in the car!" I yelled.

Grace jumped into the back seat, holding the door open for me, just as a shot rang out. I whipped around, only to hear another shot fill the night before something hot flew past my ear.

Holy shit. He's shooting at us!

I shoved her mother in the back seat beside Grace, focused more on getting her *in* the car versus trying not to hurt her.

Her mother groaned, but I slammed the door anyway and pried open the driver's door just as a bullet hit the back of my car, going right through the panel. My heart slammed against my ribs, my stomach dropping.

Headlights from her father's truck headed straight for us. Her father was only a hundred yards away, the engine's roar and spinning tires filling the cold dark night, as he leaned out the window, a gun raised.

Not only was her father racing toward us in a truck big enough to push mine off the road, but he was shooting at us too.

I dropped into the driver's seat as a shot hit a tree next to us on the side of the road.

"Stay down!" I yelled at Grace.

Since I'd never cut the motor, I swung the wheel. The tires spun, and I cursed. I tried again, but the tires refused to find a grip, moving too quickly and spinning again.

"Raven!" Grace cried from behind me. "He's going to hit us!"

Another shot rang through the night, going wide. *Move! Move!* I hit the accelerator again but more carefully. The car inched forward, the tires sticking.

But we weren't moving fast enough. Within a few seconds, her father would hit us if I couldn't floor it down the mountain, and with how slippery the roads were, that wasn't going to happen.

I made a split-second decision. I knew it was a choice that could come back to haunt me, but the woman I loved sat in the back of my car, screaming in terror while she clung to a mother she wanted desperately to protect.

"I'm sorry, Di," I whispered.

I called up the fire inside me, activating the part of my brain that was dormant in others. A huge wall of fire erupted across the highway, ten feet deep and fifteen feet high. The heat and light from it licked the sky, sparks erupting into the bitter air.

Grace screamed again, but her mother must have passed out from the pain or the cold, because she didn't make a sound.

An explosion rocketed through the night when Darren Anderson barreled headfirst into my flames. He'd been going too fast to stop.

A plume of dark smoke came next. The tires on his truck exploded, and every window in his truck shattered, as my flames consumed the monster inside.

CHAPTER SEVEN

"Oh my God, Raven! Oh my God!" Grace cried over and over from the backseat, her voice turning hysterical.

I flung the door open and jumped out of the car. With a flick in my mind, I stopped the fire. The wall of flames disappeared, leaving nothing but a burned vehicle in a heap on the road. Not even the road bore evidence of my flame since I'd hovered it above the snow and pavement.

"Is he dead?" Grace called.

I cautiously approached the truck, fearful that a blackened charred monster would rear from the seat, shooting at me again, but a new sound reached my ears, making me pause. A distant vehicle. Down the mountain, headlights from a car cut through the night.

"Shit," I whispered. Someone was coming. I frantically looked around. *How they hell do we clean this up?*

I raked a hand through my hair, walking toward the truck cab again. What I'd done meant the police would be called. An accident scene would ensue. Questions would be asked.

And I'd have to answer them.

"Shit!" I picked up a jog, my heart pounding.

Grace's father lay slumped over the wheel, his body badly burned, his useless gun lying on the passenger seat. I swallowed tightly, too afraid to touch him for fear his skin would peel away.

A groan came from him.

My breath caught. *He's still alive.*

The car engine in the distance grew louder. My mind raced. *Okay, play it cool. Say you came upon the accident. Say you have no idea what happened.* But how did I explain Grace's mother passed out in the back of my car? A woman who was the battered wife to the man who'd been badly burned? A woman who'd tried to escape?

I wracked my brain for ideas on how I'd get out of this mess. Howling wind surrounded me, and the approaching car grew louder. Grace had

stopped calling for me from the back of my car. She'd probably heard the approaching vehicle too.

"Get down!" I called to her. The more time I had to figure out a way to explain her presence, the better.

A shiver struck me despite the adrenaline coursing through my body. It was freakin' freezing out here. I studied her father again. Another groan escaped him. Through his charred clothes, it was hard to see the extent of his burns, but I imagined only a large trauma center would be able to help him. If they could help him at all.

I jumped on the balls of my feet, jittery at what was to come, when a thought struck me. *We should call the police.* It would look suspicious if we didn't.

I whipped out my cell phone as headlights from the approaching vehicle shone just down the hill from us.

"911 operator. What's your emergency?"

I shoved my free hand into my pocket as another groan came from Grace's father. "There's been an accident. A man is badly burned. It seems his truck caught on fire."

The 911 operator proceeded to ask me questions. I cringed and hoped I was answering them in a way that wouldn't come back to haunt me. I tried to keep my answers short, but as the approaching vehicle pulled up behind my car, all of my attention focused on that.

"It looks like somebody else has arrived," I told the operator. "I'll see if they can help."

"Please stay on the line, sir. We need—"

But I hung up anyway, not wanting to implicate myself further. I jogged toward the vehicle parked just behind mine as Grace tentatively called me through the back door's cracked window.

"Raven?" Grace said.

"Stay inside the car," I replied discreetly.

The bright headlights from the parked vehicle shone directly in my eyes. I brought a hand up to shield my face. I had no idea how many people were in the car, thanks to the blinding headlights.

A car door creaked opened from the new vehicle, then a frantic voice cut through the night. "Raven? Are you and Grace okay?"

I nearly collapsed in relief at the sound of Di's voice. She turned off the headlights, and I was able to see the large SUV she'd driven. Flint,

Lena, the twins, and Edgar all poured out from the doors, following Di.

Di rushed toward me, her dark hair whipping in the wind as she assessed the situation. “Are you guys okay? I had a vision of you with Grace on a mountain, trying to save her mom. It was so powerful that it woke me out of a dead sleep.”

The rest of my family circled around me. Everybody appeared half dressed and wild-eyed. Lena’s hair stood up in all directions while Flint came to my side.

“I see you took care of matters on your own.” He stared grimly at the burned truck.

I hung my head. “I had no choice. He was going to kill us.”

Flint’s jaw locked, and he nodded curtly. Lena was already racing toward the back of my car, calling for Grace. The twins and Edgar all took in the scene with open mouths.

“Holy shit. How the hell do we explain this?” Jet asked.

Di put her hands on her hips. “Who were you talking to when we drove up?”

“The 911 operator. I didn’t know what else to do. I knew if I didn’t report this it would look suspicious, and I didn’t know it was you guys driving up the road. I thought there would be witnesses, so if I didn’t call, it would look—”

She raised her hand, cutting me off. “I get it. You did the right thing. We needed to call this in, but now we need to clean it up before they get here.”

Flint was already by the truck, crouching in the snow, studying the road. “There aren’t any burn marks. How are we going to explain the fire?”

Jet touched the charred hood of the truck as another groan came from Grace’s father. He jumped back so fast, I would have thought he’d seen a ghost. “He’s still alive?”

Di’s eyes widened, and she kicked into action. She was at the driver’s door in a split second, assessing Grace’s father. But after a few seconds, she shook her head. “There’s nothing I can do for him. He needs a burn center. I’ll just make matters worse if I try to help.”

“So what do we do?” Jasper asked, coming up behind his brother, his shoulders hunched up from the cold.

Di looked around the snowy narrow highway. Trees blanketed the mountain side, towering pines and skeleton-like aspens. “We need to make

this look like an accident, like the truck started on fire on its own, so no further questions are asked." She swung around to face the twins and Edgar. "Can you guys manipulate the first responders' emotions so they don't grow suspicious or feel that foul play was at work?"

The twins both nodded, their jaws locked as serious expressions covered their faces.

Turning toward Edgar, Di softened her tone. "How comfortable do you feel taking charge of the situation? If you're able to make the police believe that this was truly an accident, any repercussions we could face may go away."

Edgar's hands shook. He stuffed them into the pockets of his jacket. "I'll help." Sweat popped up on his brow despite the bitter cold. "I came up here ta help, and I will." A twinge of the fake British accent he'd adopted as a coping mechanism during his time at O'Brien tainted his words.

Flint and I shared a worried look.

Di placed her hand on Edgar's shoulder, squeezing it, just as Lena emerged from the back of my car. She jogged toward us.

"Grace is in shock, and her mother is unconscious. Di, can you come take a look at them?"

Di nodded curtly, her dark hair swinging against her chin.

Flint stood with his hands on his hips, surveying the trees again. "If we can make a burned tree fall on his vehicle, it's possible we can play this off as a lightning strike that caused everything."

"How the heck do we do that?" Jet asked with raised eyebrows.

But I'd already caught onto Flint's idea. "I can start one of the trees on fire, but I'll need to split the tree somehow, so it looks like a lightning strike. With Lena and Flint's help, we can knock the tree over onto the vehicle, making it look like it hit the truck and started it on fire."

Jet took a step back, a sarcastic grin tilting his lips up. "Now this, I gotta see."

Snow continued to fly around us as Flint and I filled Lena and Di in on our plan. Edgar stood by the side of the road, still trembling, but a determined expression locked his jaw.

I knew he hated using his powers, but once again, he'd come to our family's rescue. As one of the three lost children buried away in O'Brien's subterranean research lab for most of his life, he'd had more drugs administered to him than the original eight in my family. Because of that,

he, Susannah, and Luke all had additional powers, but none of them were like me. I was unique in my family as I'd been born with my powers since my mother had been experimented on while she'd been pregnant.

Lena nodded her head after we'd filled her in on our plan. "Okay, yeah, I can do that. There's a lot of energy to work with out here. Do you want to start the tree on fire, Raven? While it's burning, I'll start working on the base of the trunk. As it grows weaker, can you shove it over, Flint?"

Flint clenched his hands into fists. "I'm ready whenever you are."

We chose a large pine tree, as its towering height meant it would easily fall across the road onto the truck.

"This is gonna be tricky," Lena said. "We have to make the tree land on that truck's hood without hurting Grace's father further."

Occasional groans still came from inside the truck's cab, but they had grown less frequent. I didn't know if her father would survive, and even though I wasn't proud of admitting it, I didn't care if he did.

"Let's get this over with," Flint said before jogging into the snow by the tree.

The three of us worked together, channeling our powers and unique abilities as we staged the accident scene. I called my flame up again and lit the tree on fire with an explosive spark, doing my best to mimic the intense heat and power of a lightning strike.

The trees around us whipped and flowed as Lena manipulated the energy fields among all living things. She'd grown incredibly powerful over the past few years. Thankfully, she was a good person who never used her powers in malicious ways, but if she ever chose to do that . . .

She'd be a force to be reckoned with.

Flint stayed at the base of the tree, being careful to avoid the showering sparks and swaying branches around him.

"Try it now!" Lena yelled.

Flint barreled into the tree, the trunk creaking and groaning. I kept my attention on the fire, carefully controlling it so it didn't hurt anybody on the ground.

"Holy shit," Jet whispered. "They're doing it."

In the distance, sirens wailed. Flashing lights appeared below the mountain.

"They're coming, you guys. You better hurry it up!" Jasper yelled.

Concentrating more, I grew my flame as Flint again barreled himself into the tree trunk. With a loud cracking snap, the pine tree broke at the base and began to fall. It drifted to the side, threatening to land in front of the truck.

Abruptly, the tree stopped, hovering in midair. Lena stood to my side, sweat beading along her upper lip as a fierce look of concentration bloomed on her face. Flint pushed more at the base of the tree, moving it back toward the trunk as Lena groaned.

The tree shifted in midair before falling with a bang onto the truck's hood.

I left the tree burning as the first responders arrived. The second the EMT's jumped out of the ambulance, the twins were already at work. Docile expressions covered the three EMT's faces, but they still went about their work. The police officer was the same. He stood by Di, asking questions, his voice never sounding curious or suspicious.

It took a while before the paramedics removed Grace's father from the truck. Given how uneven the terrain was, an airlift wasn't possible. Grim expressions downturned their lips as that foggy glaze coated their eyes, indicating the twins' powerful mind manipulation.

Edgar, on the other hand, worked on the police officer. I didn't exactly understand how his power worked, other than he had the ability to control minds. Whether he was rearranging the police officer's thoughts, or planting staged beliefs in the officer's mind, I didn't know. But I did know that Edgar was our best bet at coming out of this situation unscathed.

When Grace's father was finally in the ambulance heading back down the mountain, and as the police officer finished filling in his information for his report, we all breathed a sigh of relief. The officer said a cleanup crew would have to wait until the morning, and that he needed to get back to work and close the mountain road off until the burned tree and truck could be cleared.

We all nodded, murmuring our thanks as he left. When we were finally alone, Lena wrapped her arms around herself. "Do you think this will come back to haunt us?"

My gaze strayed to the back of my vehicle where Grace and her mother huddled down in the seat. Thanks to the twins and Edgar, neither the paramedics or police officer had ever realized they were there, and we wanted it to stay that way.

“I have no idea,” I replied grimly and crossed my arms. My fingertips felt numb from the cold. “But right now, we need to get Grace and her mom home. Her mom is badly injured, and she needs medical attention. And Grace…” My breath sucked in when I saw Grace’s expression through the back windshield.

Sheer terror and shock coated her face.

“I want to get Grace out of here. I never want her near this mountain again.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

I paced the medical wing in Father's mansion while Grace sat at her mother's side. The scent of antiseptic hung in the air, along with the steady beep from a machine. Grace's mother, who I'd come to learn was named Rosemary, lay on one of the beds. A cast encircled her arm, bandages wound around her chest, and multiple cuts and bruises covered her body. Darren Anderson had done a number on her.

Two days had passed since the incident on the mountain. In all that time, Grace hadn't left her mother's side for more than a few minutes, sleeping on the bed next to her, watching movies with Rosemary when she lay awake, standing vigil as her mother rested.

Most would say Grace's actions were a testament to her kind soul, but I'd noticed the fear in her eyes. I'd seen her constant glances toward the door, and the way she chronically checked her cell phone, as if waiting for a call from the hospital to say that her father had been discharged.

Anxiety pulsed from Grace in steady waves, as though she believed the only thing that would stand between her deranged father and sick mother would be her. Grace would use herself as a human shield if her father showed up, I'd bet money on it, but it wasn't possible for Darren to hurt them now.

I'd tried to reassure Grace that he'd never bother her again, but Grace was too scared that her father would find them even though he currently lay in a burn unit at the University of Colorado in Greeley. He'd been flown there after arriving in Laramie's hospital, and despite the latest medical report saying he'd lost his eye sight, his right arm had been amputated, and he'd most likely never walk again, terror still coiled around Grace, like a boa constrictor trying to suffocate her.

Anyone could see she still believed her father would return from the brink of death, but another worry tinged the back of my mind, niggling deep into my subconscious every time I tried to tell myself—and her—everything would be fine.

Grace had changed. Toward me.

Since returning from the mountain, she no longer leaned on me for support, or hinted at the feelings that had bloomed between us like a fragrant rose. Whatever had transpired in that hotel in Casper, appeared to have died on that mountain along with her horrific past, and it ate away at me like a savage predator.

Still, I tried. I barely left the medical wing, doing everything in my power to make Grace more comfortable and to help Father and Di in whatever way I could. Yet despite all of that, Grace barely spoke to me.

The only silver linings were that Rosemary didn't remember anything after I'd pushed her in the car. She had no idea that I'd started the fire. She didn't know about my power. And so far, no further questions had been asked from law enforcement. Whatever Edgar had done to them had worked, and our family's secrets remained safe.

Perhaps those were the only positives that would come from any of this.

I crossed the threshold back into the room and approached Grace, my feet silent on the linoleum. Her thin shoulders hunched forward as she cradled her mother's good hand in hers. Rosemary slept, the bruises on her face like dying purple pansies.

Grace's alluring scent fluttered to my nose when I crouched at her side. Outside the sun shone on the lawn's white snow as another afternoon began, bright sunlight flooding the room through the windows.

"Are you hungry?" I asked her quietly. "You missed lunch." I raked a hand through my hair, trying to hide my trembling fingers.

A wooden smile lifted Grace's lips. "I'm okay, but thanks for asking." She looked down, playing with her fingers.

"Um, sure. Okay. If you need anything, just let me know."

Her jaw tightened, but she didn't reply. However, she angled her body more toward her mother, her shoulders now like stiff boards versus a folded card.

Swallowing the pit in my stomach, I retreated to the hallway and walked the length of the medical wing again. I'd walked it so many times today, I'd lost count.

Not for the first time, I wondered if Grace was okay with how we'd handled her mother's care. It was the only explanation I could come up with for the shift in her behavior. Because extensive injuries plagued her mother,

both Di and Father had suggested it be safer to treat Rosemary at home. Hospitals asked questions when battered women arrived in the ER, and right now, questions could lead to our demise.

According to Father's medical scans, Rosemary suffered from a concussion, multiple rib fractures, a broken radius, and numerous deep tissue injuries. The cold had also wreaked havoc on her frail body. Two toes still healed from frostbite, and burned skin covered her cheeks. Weeks of recovery laid before her, not to mention, the cancer still ate away at her body. Her treatment for that hadn't begun, and the clock was ticking.

But when that decision was made to treat Rosemary at home, Grace wasn't consulted. As usual, Di took control, calling the shots as she saw fit—and I had agreed, going along with her plan.

I sighed heavily. Since two days had passed, and Rosemary was improving, no further discussion had been had on the matter. I could only hope that Father and Di provided Rosemary with the best care possible. Otherwise, I had a feeling Grace would never forgive me.

"Hey, Raven." Lena's cheerful voice carried from the end of the hall. She sauntered toward me, her wild red hair flying around her shoulders.

"Hi." I nibbled my finger again, not breaking my stride.

She stepped in front of me, hands on her hips, halting my movements. "What's up? You look pretty miserable, and your eyes . . ." She forced a smile. "Well, they're kinda blazing."

I hadn't bothered with contacts that morning. What was the point when Grace and my entire family knew about my power? And I was careful. I only entered Rosemary's medical room while she slept. Although, without the contacts, any deep emotion I felt was alight for the world to see. Maybe I should have worn them.

"It's nothing. I'm fine."

Lena rolled her eyes. "You know sometimes, you remind me so much of your brother, I could throttle you. It's pretty obvious everything isn't fine. What's going on?"

I leaned against the wall, shaking my head. A moment passed, and I finally replied quietly, "I don't know what's going on between me and Grace. Ever since the episode on the mountain, she hasn't really spoken with me, she's not eating much, and every time I try to reassure her that everything will be fine, she just gives me a blank look. I thought I'd done the right thing by stopping her father when he barreled toward us in his

truck, and then bringing her mother here so Father and Di could care for her, but now, I'm not so sure. I never even asked her if she was okay with any of that. I just made the decisions for her."

Lena frowned and stepped closer, her voice growing quiet. "You saved her life, Raven, and her mother's. If you hadn't used your fire, her father probably would have killed all of you, and you know Di and Father are really talented when it comes to medicine. They'll take good care of her."

A memory of Grace's father careening around the road, heading straight for us, flashed through my mind. "Maybe. But what if Grace doesn't see it that way?"

"Have you asked her?"

"She barely talks to me. How can I ask her?"

Lena's eyes softened. "You just ask her. Look, I'll go and sit with her mom and tell her to take a break. How about you talk to her and sort a few things out, 'cause if there's one thing I know, Raven, it's that you both care for each other. I'd hate to see a relationship between you wrecked, before it ever had a chance to begin."

~ ~ ~

Grace sat at the island in the kitchen, a steaming mug of tea in front of her. Outside, a blue sky stretched across the horizon. Lena had worked her magic again, convincing Grace to take a break. I figured each girl had best-friend super powers. Between their whisperings and dipped heads, I never knew what they talked about, but each seemed to be able to convince the other to do things that no one else could.

"Do you . . . uh, want to go for a walk outside?" I cupped the back of my neck from where I stood on the other side of the island.

Grace's attention fluttered to my arm, her eyes widening the slightest bit. My bicep had bulged from the movement. A brief flare of hope burst inside me, but Grace quickly looked away, pulling her lip into her mouth.

I let my arm fall. Maybe it was too hopeful to think she'd been checking me out.

"I should get back to my mom. Lena probably has things to do, and my mom—" She slid off her stool, her half-drunk tea forgotten. "She's probably going to wake up soon. It's best if I—"

I moved around the island in front of her, cutting her off. I placed my hands on her hips before I realized what I was doing. “Don’t go. Not yet.”

She squeezed her eyes tightly shut.

It felt like someone punched me in the gut. I stepped back, my hands falling, but I couldn’t stop my quiet plea. “Please, Grace? Just go for a quick walk with me, then I’ll leave you alone if you want. I’ll stop bothering you if that’s what you wish.”

She studied the floor, her toes wiggling. Her breath hitched, but she finally nodded. “Okay. Let me grab my coat.”

She scurried from the kitchen, and my stomach twisted into knots. Moving into the living room where the door to the patio waited, I threw on the first pair of boots I saw by the back door. They were Flint’s, so they fit, but I didn’t have a coat nearby. Pacing in front of the sliding door, I decided I didn’t care.

When Grace returned, she cocked her head. “Won’t you be cold?”

“Nah, I’ll just start a fire if it gets chilly.” Out there, on Father’s estate, he had maximum security. As long as we stayed on the grounds, no one would be able to see us.

I slid the door open, the large glass door squeaking in its tracks. Tufts of snow fell onto the rug from outside.

“After you,” I said.

Grace stuffed a hat on her head, her beautiful long blond hair trailing over her shoulders. My gut clenched. *God, she’s so beautiful.*

Outside, our breaths puffed in white clouds. A slight breeze blew across the snow strewn lawn. The backyard stretched to the forest. Over the past year, my family and I had spent some time cutting trails through the trees. You could walk out there for hours.

“This way.” My feet sank into the snow as we walked toward the closest trail, and I was glad Flint had left his boots behind. I couldn’t remember where I’d put mine since my mind was a wreck lately, and if I had been forced to put Edgar’s too-small loafers on, this walk would have sucked.

Grace followed behind me, her soft breathing filling the air. It wasn’t until the forest swallowed us, that the chill finally set in. With the flick of my mind, I created a fire in front of me. It hovered in the air, moving with me, warming me as we went.

Grace’s footsteps paused. When I could tell she’d stopped following me completely, I turned to face her. “Are you okay?”

Her wide eyes studied my flame. “You can really start a fire anywhere, can’t you?”

I shrugged. “Yeah.”

She watched the dancing fire, warmth emanating from it. Slipping off her mittens, she stepped closer. “It’s so warm.”

“I can make it hotter, if you’re cold.”

Her lips tilted up. “I’d be more concerned about *you* being cold. You don’t even have a hat on.”

I chuckled, pushing my hands into my pockets. “If I’m somewhere safe, I don’t worry about the cold too much.” I tapped my head. “You know, internal fire starter and all.”

She took a deep breath, and pulled her mittens back on. “Your family is extraordinary. Even though I know what you can all do, every time I see it, I’m still amazed.”

My breath caught in my throat. It was the most she had spoken to me in two days. I swallowed tightly, trying to get my response to the sound of her voice under control. “That’s because we trust you. We all know you wouldn’t tell anyone.”

She reached for a tree beside us, running her mittened hand over the bark. “Lena said I have a white cloud. A really long white cloud, and that was why she wanted to be friends with me.”

I stepped closer to her, loving the rosy color coming into her cheeks. “You have a white cloud because you have a pure soul. You wouldn’t hurt anybody, and you’re good, inside and out.”

Her eyes flashed to mine, tears forming in them. “Are you sure about that? I almost got you killed on that mountain. Would a pure soul really do that?” She rubbed her hand more over the bark, her movements growing faster and more agitated.

My feet crunched in the snow when I took another step closer to her. “Grace. I—”

“No.” She held her free hand up, halting my movements. “I dragged you and your family into everything from my past. I put you all in danger, and made you all fearful people would discover who you really are. How could a good person do that?” Pain filled her words, making my heart

break. “Maybe I’m not as good as you all think. Maybe I’m not good at all. Maybe I’m as horrible as my father always said I was.”

“Hey,” I said stepping closer to her, my voice growing gruff. I wiped a single tear from her cheek, before it could freeze into ice. “Where is all of this coming from? You did nothing wrong in Wyoming, and you didn’t drag any of us into anything. *I* wanted to come with you. *I’m* the one who called my family. *We* all chose to get involved and help you. Nothing you did caused any of this. We all made our own choices.”

“But did you really? None of you knew how bad it would get, and now . . .” She dragged in a breath. “I keep thinking that you deserved better than that. That I’d acted selfishly and didn’t consider the extent that your family and you could have been hurt. That I only thought about saving my mom and wanting her to be safe with me.”

“Is that why you’ve been distancing yourself from me lately?” I wanted so desperately to wrap my arms around her, to kiss away all of the hurt and pain in her voice. “You think you’re not worthy of us helping you?”

She squeezed her eyes again, more tears spilling onto her cheeks. “Yeah. I feel awful about everything, especially everything that happened to you, Raven.” Her eyes opened, the tears in them making her irises look like sparkling sapphires. “You risked your life for me and my mom. You didn’t give your own safety a second thought, and I let you do that, without once thinking of the position that put you in.”

“Oh, babe.” I pulled her to me, no longer able to help myself. My arms slid around her waist. She resisted at first, her body staying stiff, but then she relented and melted into me. “You have it so wrong.”

“But I don’t. I’m no good, Raven. I’m tainted. I tried to tell you that I’m not like other girls. You deserve someone whole and without all of the crap that comes with being with me.”

“Just stop it right there,” I growled. Anger rose up inside me, making my hands clench her puffy jacket. “You are *not* tainted. You are so much more than the ugliness that is your father. Do you really think, of all people, that I’d ever judge someone for how they were raised? The man who raised me was a monster, yet my family still loves me, still accepts me. They’d never turn their back on me, and I’d never turn my back on you.”

“But you could have died, Raven! He *shot* at you!”

“Well, good thing for me that he was a lousy shot.”

She laughed, the sound bubbling through her tears.

I traced another finger across her cheek, my gaze drifting to her lips. Those luscious sweet berry lips. “You come from a broken childhood. That’s true, but guess what? So do I. So does Lena. So does Flint, and Di, and Edgar, and everyone else in this beautiful messy family of mine. And you know what? I wouldn’t change it. Not any of it. It’s our pasts, and our actions *because* of those pasts, that make us who we are today. I hate your dad. I’ll always hate him, but you’re also the person you are today because of the experiences he forced on you, and I freakin’ love everything about you.”

Her breath sucked in, her head snapping back. “You love me?”

I thumbed her lower lip. Her tongue darted out, grazing my fingertip. “Yeah. I love you, Grace Anderson. I’ve been falling in love with you for months, and this past weekend, when I saw how willing you were to help your mom no matter the cost to yourself, well, it just made me love you even more. I want to be with you. Forever. You’re it for me, if you’ll have me.”

More tears formed in her eyes, like giant raindrops before they fell onto her cheeks. “Oh, Raven. Why are you so good to me?”

“Because you deserve nothing less. And if you have a hard time believing that, then I’m going to spend the rest of my life reminding you.”

She kissed my thumb, shaking her head. “I don’t know if I’ll ever understand why you chose to love me, but I’ll take it. I’ve been falling in love with you too, and I want nothing more than to be with you, but I thought you deserved better.”

I dipped my head, her lips beckoning me. “I’m going to spend the rest of my life making sure you understand just how much you deserve this, ’cause you deserve everything and more, Grace. Everything.”

She leaned into my hand, her skin cool in the winter afternoon. “I love you too, Raven. So much more than you probably know.”

I growled, as a wave of relief and possession washing through me. Pulling her closer, I pressed my mouth to hers, kissing away all of her fear, doubt, and anxiety. Because if there was one thing I knew, one thing I was absolutely certain of, it was that other people’s sins didn’t define us. Just because Grace’s father was a monster, didn’t mean she was, and I’d spend the rest of our days reminding her of that every time she forgot.

CHAPTER NINE

Six Months Later

I studied the ring in the small box. A perfect, one-carat oval diamond nestled in the setting, a halo of smaller diamonds around it. My heart pounded, my mouth going dry. If all went well this afternoon, I was going to ask Grace to marry me tonight, and she had no idea it was coming.

I snapped the lid closed but not fast enough. Jet snickered at my side. “Are you sure that’s big enough? Chicks dig big diamonds. Like huge diamonds. You may want to return that and get the three-carat one.”

I elbowed Jet, getting him in the ribs which got a laugh from Jasper. “Grace is like Lena,” I replied. “She doesn’t care about materialistic stuff. She’s probably going to berate me for how big this one is, saying I should have bought a smaller one and given the rest of the money to charity.”

Jet opened his mouth to respond, but Flint beat him to it. “Don’t listen to these yo-yo’s. She’s gonna love it.”

A chubby toddler hand reached for me, Conroy’s wide eyes on the black box. “Preddy! Me see!”

“Now, now, little rascal. Don’t be telling your mama that Raven bought a diamond ring.” Luke rearranged Conroy, who perched on his hip, while little Emma sat on Luke’s shoulders. Luke somehow juggled two squirming one-year-olds competently, never dropping them. “She’ll probably want one too, and then papa’s gonna be out all the money he’s saving for that new flat screen.”

Emma fisted her mouth, straightening on Luke’s shoulders. “Mama. Want mama.”

Edgar reached for her, crooning to the tiny tot. “Now, you’ve done it, mate. She heard the magic word. Do you want your mama?”

Emma nodded and clapped. “Mama! Mama! Mama!”

Luke groaned. “Jacinda’s gonna kill me if we arrive early at her hair salon to pick her up. Apparently, waiting two weeks between blow-outs isn’t acceptable.” Luke dipped his shoulders and handed the wiggly Emma over to Edgar. Emma immediately began patting Edgar on the cheek with her hand.

I laughed. “If you buy Jacinda a diamond bracelet, I bet she’ll forgive you for showing up early.”

Luke planted a hand on his free hip. “Just who’s side are you on, Raves? Remember, you and Grace could end up with two little monsters like this and then we’ll see whose laughing.”

Flint chuckled. “We better get a move on. How much longer will that dose last in Conroy’s system?”

Luke glanced at his watch. “Di gave him a half dose, so we can stay out in public till six tonight. After that, all bets are off as this little bugger may change into a wolf again.”

Pride filled Luke’s words. We all knew that he loved playing in the backyard with his son after they’d both transformed. Only thing, Conroy still didn’t understand transforming in public was a risk.

Anytime Luke or Jacinda took the twins out, Di or Father would administer a small dose of Emma’s daily drug to her brother so they didn’t have to worry about him transforming in public. Emma, on the other hand, still got her daily dose since she still couldn’t control her transformations.

However, on the few times they’d tried to wean Emma off the drug, she’d showed progress which meant she could probably come off the drug sometime in the next few years.

I shoved the ring box into my pocket and clapped Flint on the back. “Wish me luck, guys. I’ve gotta pick Grace and her mom up from the hospital. I promised to help them home after her mom’s scan.”

“Is she still cancer-free?” Jasper asked.

I shrugged. “We still don’t know. Since she tolerated the chemo and radiation, the doctors are hopeful, but this scan will show if she’s still cancer-free. If she is, then she won’t need her next checkup for another three months.”

“Glad to hear it.” Flint nudged me after my hand dropped from his shoulder. “And what’s the latest on Grace’s dad?”

I scowled, as I always did anytime I was reminded of her father. “He’s still alive, and he’s still in rehab, and it’s gonna be awhile until all of his

skin graft surgeries are done, but so far, other than one nasty phone call to her mom, he hasn't bothered them. It probably helps that he can't walk or drive."

"And he hasn't mentioned anything to the police about the fire you started?" Luke asked.

I shook my head. "He doesn't remember the accident. I'm not worried about that anymore. My only concern is if he tries to go after Grace and her mom again."

Edgar frowned. "You just let me know if I need to step in. I can help sway him to leave them alone if needed."

I smiled, not only because Edgar offered to help with no hesitation, but also because his voice stayed even, only the barest hint of his strange accent lilting his words. "Thanks, bro. We'll let you know if your services are needed, but right now, I don't think he's going to be a problem."

~ ~ ~

I waited on the curb outside of the hospital. Through the revolving door, I caught sight of a beautiful tall girl with long blond hair and eyes the color of the sea. Beside her walked Rosemary. Grace's mother still wore a scarf over her head, but tufts of hair had begun growing back on her head.

I threw on my hazard lights and stepped out of my new car. I'd sold my Tesla after seeing Grace's expression every time she saw the divot in the repaired back panel. The scar from the bullet hole was still apparent despite the bodywork, and the last thing I wanted to do was remind her of her father every time I pulled up to our house.

"Hi, babe," I said when I reached her, slipping an arm around her waist and pulling her close.

"Hey." She tilted her head back, her lips soft.

I planted a kiss on her mouth, then turned to her mom before helping her through the door. "How did it go?"

Rosemary beamed and squeezed Grace's hand. "Still cancer-free!"

Grace did a happy dance. "They said all of her scans are still clear."

I grinned. "That's great news. We should celebrate!"

Rosemary winked subtly in my direction. "I was thinking the same thing." Grace helped her mom to the front seat, opening the door for her. "How about dinner out tonight?" her mom asked.

Grace shrugged. “Sure. Whatever you want, Mom. Do you want to pick the place?”

Rosemary shot me another covert look. “Not a problem. I’ll make reservations.”

The rest of the afternoon, the box pressed into the pocket in my pants. Several times, I took the ring out to look at it, wondering what Grace would think when she saw it. But it wasn’t until we went to the small Italian bistro that her mom made reservations at, and Grace saw the table full of my entire family, that I truly realized tonight would determine where the rest of my life went.

Grace had no idea what I intended to do, but everyone else did. And watching Grace, as she moved about the table, greeting all of my family like loved friends, while her mom beamed from her seat, I knew I’d found the perfect woman to mesh into the Fielding clan.

Grace fit with us.

She belonged.

Whether or not she knew it, she’d become a part of our family the day Lena revealed to her who we really were. It was only a matter of time before we made it official.

So when dessert rolled out, and I got down on one knee, everyone grew quiet. They knew it was coming, and my chest filled when tears rushed into Grace’s eyes.

I opened the box, the ring sparkling in the light. “I love you, Grace. I have from the moment we met, and that’s never going to stop. You’re the only woman I can imagine spending my life with, and I’d be honored if you married me.”

Tears streamed down Grace’s cheeks as her mother dabbed her eyes discreetly at my side, while my adopted father and family watched on.

A grin spread across Grace’s face. “Yes, Raven, I’ll marry you! A thousand times, yes!”

THANK YOU

Thank you for reading *The Complete Lost Children Series*! Krista hopes you love the Fielding family as much as she loved creating them.

If you enjoy Krista Street's writing, make sure you visit her website. You can join her newsletter to hear about new releases and also learn about Krista's other books and series. Links to her social media platforms are available on every page.

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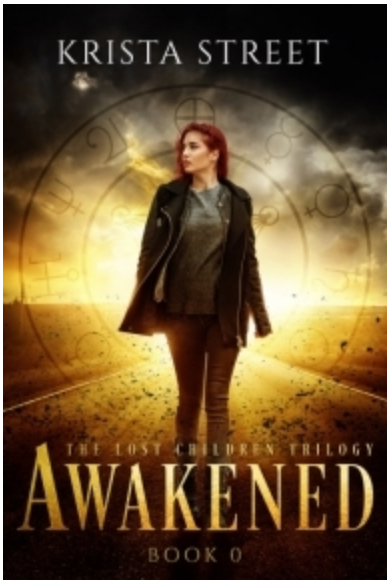
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